

‘Most of us spend not inconsiderable pieces of our lifetimes falling in love. Having achieved this state of semi-hypnotic fantasy, confidently we await what will happen next . . .’

Marianne, the heroine and narrator of this wise and funny novel, reflects a little ruefully on the limitations of love as she has found it before embarking on a story which abounds in good humour, not-so-good living and brilliantly entertaining incident. Her own loves include the unspeakable young German officer, Hans, the lugubriously faithful Alfred, the equally faithful sheepdog, Elsa (dog-loving, it seems, has its limitations too), and the elusive, fascinating malcontent, Laurie, whose doubtful inclinations and predilection for the unsuitable provide a maze of dead-ends for his affectionate friend.

Kathleen Farrell has very special talents of wry observation, wit and sympathy. In *Limitations of Love* they are displayed to the full.

By the same author



MISTLETOE MALICE
TAKE IT TO HEART
THE COST OF LIVING
THE COMMON TOUCH

LIMITATIONS OF LOVE

BY

KATHLEEN FARRELL

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Chapter One

MOST of us spend not inconsiderable pieces of our lifetimes falling in love. Having achieved this state of semi-hypnotic fantasy, confidently we await what will happen next. Often nothing happens. We have chosen the wrong people in the wrong places at the wrong times. If we are lucky we are able to disregard these initial disasters and begin anew. The few born to misfortune decide never again to risk offering what may once more be unacceptable, and, perhaps, fall irrevocably in love with themselves.

I believe I am too fond of falling in love with people, with places, with animals, and with books, ever to be left with nothing, or no one except myself to love. One cannot be sure, though, what kind of person one is, and it is far more difficult to know what one will become.

It was not until I left school that I wanted a personal image of myself to keep in my mind, and occasionally I looked in the mirror, wondering what kind of life I would have, and who would fall in love with me. Nobody would, ever. I was too short. I said my name over and over again: Marianne. Spoken slowly Ma-ri-anne became a tall cool sound, and I longed to change myself to suit it.

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If one is young and lonely and people are hard to come by, any living creature is worth affectionate consideration. When I was nineteen I gave my limited love to a sort of sheepdog belonging to the proprietress of a pension perched on the edge of a Bavarian lake. The dog's name was the Empress Elsa; she had a slow ungainly strut and a lot of matted hair covering her eyes. Wherever I went, Elsa came with me. I was moved by her devotion, not realising until I was on the point of departure that Elsa had been instructed to keep me company. It was considered unsuitable for a young woman, especially a stupid Engländerin who might get lost — or worse — to wander over the mountain slopes alone. No wonder Elsa yawned. Considering her occasional boredom, the amiable creature did her duty tactfully and well, only once — when we were together in a small inn on the outskirts of one of the thick-treed Bavarian forests — showing me who was the mistress. The heat was midday and mid-summer compressed into one burning afternoon.

We were drinking beer; mine was blond, slightly bitter, served in a china tankard with a metal lid. Elsa's was a darker sweeter brew served in a bowl on the wooden herb-strewn floor.

Beer and boiled eggs were Elsa's weaknesses, eggs boiled in the German way, hardly cooked, just warmed through. The first time I had asked for an egg I expected one with its shell on in an egg-cup. Instead I was given a long-handled spoon and three white naked things slithering about in a tall glass. When no one was looking, I offered them to Elsa. She sucked up the slippery mass most dexterously.

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Apart from my sipping and Elsa's lapping, the inn was silent; we were the only customers.

The landlord lolled on a bench outside. His wife hoed in the vegetable garden. Suddenly the man shouted to the woman and they both hurried indoors. A small radio was switched on and for perhaps a quarter of an hour a harshly powerful voice shouted commands and exhortations. Unfortunately I could understand very little. When the voice paused the pauses were deliberate, and from the background came the rhythmic sounds of organized clapping.

Although the innkeeper and his wife sat tensely, they did not appear to be listening with any particular interest. Perhaps the speech, shouted with such fervour and quickened by emotion, was difficult to follow. I felt there was little need for them to understand. Instead of comprehension they gave themselves to the noise; they were possessed by it as if it was the voice of God.

Drowsing over the tankard of beer, I tried to remember: Hitler, the Führer — and all the fuss in England. Ever since I had learned to read there were black headlines in the newspapers — strikes, depressions, hunger marches, rumours of war, screaming banners about the Rhine — and now there was the menace of Hitler. It was all Hitler, Hitler, Hitler; really one simply could not be bothered, especially when the weather was so wonderful, and the Bavarian villages, backed by softly sloping mountains, facing placid lakes, with their clusters of pretty painted houses and clear streams trickling over cobblestones in the main streets, and the slow-moving friendly people, were all exactly what I had always dreamed of.

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'No, one simply could not bother. Besides, it was too hot.

Vaguely the name of Hitler linked with Berchtesgaden. According to the little map I carried in my pocket we were near there. Perhaps it was not too far to walk?

In halting German I asked the innkeeper's wife. This pleased her. Yes, the path was direct. Over the hill and along by the edge of the wood, just where the sky began.

• Her husband drew it for me on a slate, and put in tiny fluffy clouds to show me where the sky was.

• How long? I asked.

'Zwei Stunden.'

Two hours to return? This was too difficult for me and I drew a circle on the palm of my hand.

'Perhaps.' She sounded hesitant, and I doubted whether she had understood.

I took a few tentative paces along the path to Berchtesgaden. Elsa pointed her nose towards the way we had come, through the pine forest, down the grassy incline, into the valley where the village was.

Elsa looked back at me and barked once: a sharp word of command.

Thankfully I followed her, glad to have the decision made for me.

The pension was cheap and pretty. On the scrubbed boards by the side of my bed was a white fur rug. My balcony — which was at the back and opened on the main village street — was covered with pots of delicate plants blossoming with small pink flowers, some kind of balsam.

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From windows, doorways and lamp-posts baskets of geraniums, fuchsias, and striped-leaved ivies were hanging.

Everyone knew me because they recognised Elsa. It was evident that I was staying at the pension and Elsa was my nursemaid. Continually I was greeted by smiling faces and God-be-with-you's.

I basked in that summer of being liked, and I even began to like myself a little — this was quite a change. The stocky scowling adolescent who had left London grew into a plump smiling sun-tanned young woman.

Only once did I falter: sitting one evening in a café garden overlooking the fast-flowing Rhine, a woman not more than five years older than I was stooped to fondle Elsa's ears.

'I had a dog very like that.' She spoke in English. 'He is dead now. No, you need not say you are sorry. I shot him. For many reasons I cannot take him with me, and without me he would not want to live.'

Take him where?

'Anywhere, and as soon as possible,' she said. 'England, perhaps. Or America. I'm a doctor, so I shall find work.'

Why are you going away?

'You'll see,' she said. 'One cannot be blind for ever. It is different for you — you are here on holiday. Enjoy yourself. You won't return often — at least not for a long time. Afterwards you may not want to.'

After what?

She bent down as if to whisper some dog message into Elsa's ear. 'After the war,' she said; 'and unless something is done soon, very soon, there will be war.'

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Swiftly she left us; a breath of cooler air disturbing a perfect summer.

I read late in bed that night, unable to sleep. The air was oppressive; a languid heaviness of harvest heat pushing June aside. With the first hardly perceptible pallor of early dawn the freshness returned, and I fell asleep listening to the mountain-born stream licking gently over the cobbles in the street below.

The next morning, feeling almost myself again, I bought a green felt hat with a pheasant's feather stuck in the hat-band. For long I had coveted this — although I do not remember ever wearing it.

After slithering down several mountain paths, dry and slippery surfaces of loose stones, Elsa yapping anxiously at my heels, I decided I must equip myself either with proper walking shoes, thick-soled and studded, or with a stick. The shoes were expensive; the stick was not. I chose a thin cane, light to handle, with a pointed metal tip. The cobbler and village saddler, who also sold walking-sticks, insisted on fixing a shield near the handle with the name of the village on it. In pantomime he demonstrated how the pointed ferrule could be used on steep places. The tip must be dug firmly into the ground; if this was done one could never fall.

In practice his demonstration was incorrect. Either the ground was too dry and hard or, in a moment of panic, I could not find where the ground was. Once I brought the stick down with some force on my foot, and after hobbling back to the pension, with Elsa, a most impressionable animal, limping by my side, I spent the next day sitting on the balcony. Elsa, bored and yawning even

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oftener, stood with her head resting on my lap. After supper I managed to walk to the nearest café where thick-set Bavarians wearing leather jerkins and shorts, and felt hats with feathers on the sides (exactly like mine), slapped their knees, clapped their hands and stamped their clog-like shoes in some lumpish local dance.

Elsa waited outside, as usual, enjoying the cooler air of the evening. On the first occasion she accompanied me into the café, but the thick smokey atmosphere hurt her eyes, and the thumping dances made her nervous. No matter what time I left, Elsa was always there, patient, uninterested, yet mindful of her duty, and ready to walk back with me.

I asked whether Elsa could sleep in my bedroom — this request was refused. During the daytime she was allowed to visit me on the understanding that she walked straight through the room to settle herself on the balcony. At night, no. It was not permitted.

Why?

'A dog in a bedroom is not healthy.'

Why?

'Because it is not. Also there is the question of the white rug.'

A suggestion that the rug should be taken away met with an unsympathetic response. That was unthinkable.

Why?

'Because a white fur rug and a handbasin are two of the special amenities of the house. Standards must not be lowered.'

After that I gave up, and watched Elsa walking purposefully — and I liked to believe unwilling — to her

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sleeping quarters each evening: a very foreign-shaped basket, straw-lined, with a curving half-roof, standing in an out-house leading from the kitchen.

That summer I fell in love with everyone, although perhaps with Elsa most of all. Next to her in my affections was an officer, almost as young as I was, not more than twenty, though already he had acquired the manners of one accustomed to giving orders. His unexceptional boyish face was bad-tempered in repose, although I did not think so then. How impressive he was, booted and spurred, clicking his heels, saluting, kissing my fingertips. Perhaps he was merely an officer of one of the local youth organizations which in Bavaria may have corresponded to the Hitler Jugend. I shall call him Hans.

Now I realise why Hans chose me; not for any beauty or grace (I had little of either) but for an argumentative if uninformed mind, allied to a careless attitude of independence — neither of which German girls were encouraged to have — and principally because I was the only foreigner of his age who was unaccompanied. To pick up one of the local girls was not at all 'smart'. To have an affair with a foreigner was 'smart'. An 'affair' consisted of giggling slightly guilty meetings to drink coffee in the mornings, a dance or two in the tiny crowded bar in the evenings, followed by a stroll back to my pension, arms linking, and a brief kiss on my cheek. The kiss was daring; when I rushed indoors my face burned from both the sun and my reckless behaviour.

Our summer idyll was constrictingly silent. There was no language we could share. My German phrase-book taught me how to say that the sheets were damp, or the

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room too small, that I had mislaid my ticket, missed the train, lost my way, caught a cold, or broken my leg; also, most capriciously, that my sister had been struck by lightning. But there were no instructions how to whisper, 'I do like you. Please dance with me again. You may kiss me on the lips. I will meet you tomorrow and tomorrow and the day after, and the day after that, and for ever, providing ever does not last longer than the end of the month when I must go home.'

In spite of these difficulties we managed fairly well. Hans put his right hand against the left breast pocket of his tunic and fluttered his fingers to show how quickly his heart was beating. I opened my eyes wide, wrinkled my nose, and bestowed on him what I imagined was a *femme fatale* smile. This encouraged him to flutter his fingers more vigorously, and I repeated the performance. I must have looked absurd with my round face, freckled nose and close-cropped mid-mouse hair, sun-bleached to sand colour in the front.

After a week of laughing evenings, Hans may have grown accustomed to me, and begun to wonder whether I might turn out to be the girl he wanted. He was even more attentive, although less at ease in my company. He clicked, bowed, and saluted more punctiliously. When he touched my arm the gesture was no longer merely one of a warm young hand affectionately feeling firm flesh, but rather that of a man of importance who pulls his chosen companion towards him. I was his, and I must not be contaminated by any casual contact with the common people of the streets.

Hans tried to teach me German, but he often forgot to

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smile during the lessons. Lazy-minded when knowledge was thrust upon me, at best not quick to learn, sleepy after the hours of sun, and the glasses of thin new wine, tasting so innocuous, potently affecting, I made little effort to concentrate. Elsa and I yawned in unison while Hans pointed to objects and snapped out the German words.

Then instead of merely pointing he began to use the English words, and that was not easy either: he must have looked them up in a rather eccentric pronouncing dictionary.

'The table, the knife, the window, the plant, the sugar, the dog, the door, you, us,' he said over and over again, pointing to each object with a stiffened forefinger, ending by a little rap on my hand to knock the words into my sun-soaked head.

'*Der Tisch, das Messer, das Fenster*, I stumbled through the beginning. Oh no, I simply couldn't remember. Not a single word more. I was laughing. Hans was not.

'*Der Tisch, das Messer, das Fenster, der Pflanze, der Zucker, der Hund, die Tür, Sie, Uns.*'

When he said *Uns* he took both my hands in his hands. He pointed to the table again, and waited.

Der Tisch?

He smiled and nodded.

He held up a knife.

Der Misser?

He shook his head: '*Das Messer.*'

Each time he pointed to the object, said the word, and I repeated it.

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Then relentlessly he began the list again: table, knife, window, plant, sugar.

I might as well try. To learn a few words of German would not hurt me. In fact it was what I was supposed to be there for. At last I managed to remember all of them, every single word, with the appropriate *der*, *das*, or *die* attached. But I had learned them as I would a rhyme, making a song in my mind, hissing the sibilants, cooing the vowels, and trying to spit the gutturals in the back of my throat. I spoke them as a bird talks.

Hans nodded his partial approval, held up his spoon as though it was a baton, and conducted me into my list again.

Once more I sang them out perfectly in order. What pleasure! And how easy to succeed when one gives one's mind to it.

Then he tricked me, jabbing his finger at the objects in different order: you, us, knife, plant, door.

Der Tisch, das Messer, das Fenster, der Pflanze. I began . . . I knew I was lost. I could not remember them except in order. I had not bothered to identify the words, they were just a jingle to me. To please was harder than I thought.

Suddenly Hans laughed, leaned towards me and kissed my cheek, then led me in to dance again.

It was only the first lesson. I had proved dull-witted, but not unwilling, and who wanted an intelligent woman, anyway?

During subsequent lessons I found that if I made a point of looking alert and interested, concentrating on the last few words, to some extent I could deceive him. Willy-nilly I remembered a little, although an hour after

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he had left me I had forgotten again. Everything was so wonderful, and I did not want to waste my time, although I did not intend to allow Hans, a pleasing personable escort, to escape me.

A week later, a snapshot of me — taken by Hans — was buttoned away in the inside breast pocket of his tunic. The snapshot showed a dumpling of a girl with a round smiling face and eyes screwed up against the sun, wearing a sleeveless cotton frock with a square neck, cut like a gym slip, tightly belted where my waist ought to have been if I had had a waist. I was balanced precariously and gracelessly on top of a gate. Goodness knows how I got up there; perhaps Hans lifted, or more likely hauled, me up for the occasion.

Soon it was apparent — even to me — that Hans's holiday interfest was thickening to serious intent.

Evidently he had been studying English in order to explain what was wrong with me. He said everything three times in case I had not understood.

His expression of concentrated complaining became familiar to me, but never welcome.

At first I was prepared to be co-operative. For instance there was my figure: anyone might have complained about that. Day by day I became rounder. The mountain air, long ambling walks with Elsa, trying to learn German, and dancing in the evenings, gave me an enormous appetite. I was always hungry. Hans bought me coffee with whipped cream an inch thick on top, pressed me to eat large cone-shaped chocolate cakes filled with a paste of rum-butter and crushed hazel-nuts, so it was most unfair if my plumpness displeased him.

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At last I understood. It was not my figure he was complaining about, but my face.

That hurt. It was such an insurmountable barrier; my face must be accepted because my face was me. There was nothing I could do about it. Perhaps my nose was shining: Opening my purse I pulled out a powder box.

After snatching the powder box and closing it, Hans hesitated, wondering, perhaps, if he dared to throw it away, then he handed it back to me.

He touched my lips with one forefinger, and shook his head.

'Forbidden,' he said. He regarded his finger with disgust before wiping it on his handkerchief. His handkerchiefs were particularly large and almost abnormally white; once I borrowed one and felt it was not intended for use.

No one was near; the only sounds the insect hum of June, except for Hans's voice, trying to find words to lecture me.

We were sitting at a café outside the village; two or three tables in a cottage garden: a small supplementary summer trade to provide a family with a little more food than was essential to enable them to exist during the severe snow-wrapped winter. Nothing to eat except the inevitable sour-sweet black bread, thinly sliced, served in a muslin-covered basket: orange and lemon squash, synthetic and nasty, glasses of skimmed milk, cheap enough to be bought by the local children, these were the only drinks, except in season — and the season was then beginning — a syrup of coarse preserving sugar crushed into wood strawberries. The first sip was sweet and rich,

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but afterwards a bitterness stayed in the mouth, roughening the edges of one's teeth.

Again Hans said 'forbidden' in a tone suited to reprimanding a dog.

What's forbidden? I was unaccustomed to being spoken to so brusquely. I remember staring at him, mentally arching my back, ready to pounce. His square head, short muscular neck set on somewhat heavy shoulders, had a potential brutality — I had not noticed this before — a suggestion denied by his nondescript amiable features. Hans pointed to a minute red smear on his handkerchief.

'Bad,' he said.

Irritated and suddenly bored, I resented the perfect blue-skied day being spoiled by Hans sitting opposite me saying 'forbidden' and 'bad'. What kind of conversation was that?

I pointed to the glass, then to my lips. The dark plummy liquid stained.

He shook his head again.

'Colour on your mouth, Marianne,' he said, and what made it worse it sounded like 'mouse'.

The full frustration of being unable to communicate settled over me. I felt my face congealing in a stubborn mutinous mould; to my shame my eyes filled with tears. Stooping to fondle Elsa, I blinked: the tears did not fall. There ~~was~~ was so much I wanted to ask him. Why did you choose me? You must have known I coloured my mouth, you *must* have known. What about all the German girls who don't use lipstick or even face powder? What about all the German girls who look incapable of

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answering back even if they were spoken to in their own language? Why didn't you choose one of them instead? Why didn't you leave me alone? The tears made my eyes feel large and hot. Would I never be completely grown-up? Always half-child, half-woman, being told what, or what not, to do?

A few tears fell; self-pity mingled with fury. I did not want to lose Hans. But I wanted him — if I wanted him — on my terms, not on his.

Seeing the tears his tenderness returned; he caressed my fingertips, kissing each in turn, whispering soothing-sounding German phrases.

He thought I had given in: I was convinced he had.

No, I did not want to lose him; although not handsome, Hans was jaunty, spick and span in his Ruritanian-like uniform. The determination of his presence pleased me, gave me a sense of security, of being looked after in a strange country. Below middle height, and thick in shape, he walked with a lift and a spring to each step. He danced more than well, as if dancing was a natural way of traversing a limited space; neither holding too tightly nor entirely letting go. His movements derived from one movement; living, breathing, dancing, and walking were all one to him. He was perfectly in control of himself — he was afraid only of appearing ridiculous. Once, swirling around the dance floor in the quickening whirl of an old-fashioned waltz, I caught my heel in my billowing dress and skidded across the polished boards, pulling Hans with me; after crashing into a table, half collapsing, we managed to stop. I was young enough to burst out

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laughing, giving in to laughter, and all the bystanders laughed with me, clapping their hands on their knees and stamping their feet. Breathless yet utterly happy, ready to begin again, I opened my arms for Hans to sweep me back into the music. Then I saw his face, furious, discomfited. Suddenly I laughed even louder because I was so absurdly happy. Hans was not happy. Perhaps he was never quite happy with me after that incident; he hustled me off, refusing to dance again that evening.

Indefinably I realised that the colour on my mouth — attractive to him at first — might suddenly make him feel ridiculous. Perhaps now he had decided that I might become more than a holiday companion, I must be taught to present myself sedately. Why couldn't I be what he wanted?

He leaned across the table, and for the first time he kissed my offending mouth. Tears — not jagged rages of crying, naturally, those would be embarrassing, but softly falling quietly flowing tears — touched his heart. I was young enough to cry without my face breaking to pieces. Gently, with lover-like gestures, he wiped my already drying eyes, petted me, coaxed me to smile, putting one forefinger beneath my chin and tickling me back to affection.

Suddenly, after a preface of bowings, clickings, hand kissing, and arrangements for our usual evening rendezvous, he left me. It was necessary for him 'to report'. I never found out to whom, nor what had to be reported. Often I have scolded myself for my lethargy, for my easy acceptance of the long summer days without question and little curiosity.

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Perhaps if Elsa, my second self, had not been with me, I might have acted differently. Her comforting presence made Hans's departure less of a loss — I did not even bother to consider where he was going, nor why. Men, even young men, always had 'appointments' — one just took that for granted, and waited, or found someone else. Besides, I wasn't alone: Elsa was with me. In a way she was even more companionable than Hans. I could talk freely to her, confident she understood.

He's gone again, I said. What shall we do now?

Scratching behind one ear, peering with hair-hidden eyes, Elsa panted her laments about the heat. She would follow me anywhere, but she preferred the shade. So we walked in the shade, Elsa and I.

By then she was an odder-looking dog than ever: thick curly fur around her face, straight spiky strands over her eyes, her back shorn like a lamb; I had clipped her with my nail-scissors, believing, as I still do, that she ought to have been stripped in the summer.

The woman who kept the pension spoke sharply to me.

'It is good you have not touched the fringes from her forehead. That would be unkind.'

Yes, it was good, and I was glad that I had held myself in check.

After Hans had left the air became more sultry. For once I was tired, a little out of temper.

Never consciously before had I considered Hans as a person, apart from me. Now I forced myself to do this,

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and found I did not know him at all, and wondered whether I would ever be able to know him.

Supposing we were able to talk? What would we say to each other? I should have to argue — unless he *had* really 'given in'. Suddenly I knew I was pretending: if either of us gave in, I would have to be the one to do it. But could I? Was it important enough? And wouldn't 'giving in' involve me in doing so again and again, without end? No, that was impossible. Perhaps I could charm him instead. How? Sitting on my balcony practising charm I bit my thumb-nails down to the quick. Oh, it was all hopeless! And because it was hopeless I turned fiercely against myself. Why was I so dull and stupid and charmless? Then I decided that Hans was entirely at fault. But if Hans wasn't there who would dance with me? Who would hold my hand, run with me down to the lake, carry my books, buy me coffee and ice creams? Who else could make me feel cosily part of a pair, and not one alone? Who would kiss me? By then I was used to being kissed; kisses were sweet and warming, and not to be kissed good night at the door of the pension would be . . . would be what? Oh, miserable, utterly miserable. No, I couldn't be alone now, after always, or almost always, being together. Somehow I would manage not to lose Hans; I wouldn't 'give in', either.

To retain my identity was an effort. Childishly I made the worst of myself to spite him; my freckles remained obstinately apparent in spite of a thicker coating of face powder. I bought a brighter lipstick and used it lavishly. It spread itself around the corners of my mouth,

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leaving its mark on cups and spoons and napkins. It ran in the sun and tasted rancid; fiercely intent on being myself, I persevered.

After this we met just as often, but Hans was not the same. His disappointment brooded in the corners of his lips, his gestures were impatient and abrupt, and although most of what he said I could not understand, I understood enough: he snapped at waiters, found fault with the coffee, banged on the table with his fist sending the cups and saucers dancing if we were not immediately attended to, often raised his voice. He became a bully, and I began to fear him, or if not exactly to fear him, to find he made me nervous, restive. Previously if I was unpunctual, it was no matter; he longed to see me, and knowing I would eventually arrive he waited with pleasure. Suddenly the atmosphere was different; slightly disastrous; Hans still waited for a girl looking like me but, thinking like someone else. When I was a few minutes late I was flurried and apologetic; he kissed me coldly, his lips were hard.

I'm sorry, I said, I'm sorry I'm sorry I'M SORRY — there! Isn't that enough? But nothing was enough — unless I washed my face in the fountain — or I might try crying. I tried to cry, but the time for that had gone.

Having had Hans's whole attention, his smiling secret glances, his hand protectively upon my arm, his deference, this sudden partial indifference was difficult to bear. To comfort myself I tried to remember poems about the wounds of love. Not one, not even a line that was applicable; only *Love is not love that alters when it alteration*

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finds, which was far from fitting. Hans had altered, but that was not the point. It was not for me to love Hans — that might come later, but at the moment it was quite unnecessary — Hans ought to love me, and I hadn't altered.

I missed him: even when he was with me I missed him because he no longer cared, and his caring was what I needed — more than Hans himself.

There was no one to talk to, except Elsa, and I told her all about it, clasping my arms around her neck, giving her all the excess of affection Hans ought to have given to, and perhaps required from, me. She responded as best she could, but she was a dog made for friendship rather than devotion.

The ending was not dramatic. I missed that too — what a pity we could not forswear each other with richly memorable phrases, a little like *Romeo and Juliet* with a less tragic ending — although that would have been difficult anyway without a language we could both properly understand.

When the day of my departure came, I was sad to go, but not overwhelmed by grief as, impressionable as I was, I might have been if Hans and Elsa had been a little more like the man and dog I had occasionally dreamed of. And then there was always the possibility that at the very last minute Hans might persuade me to stay a day or two longer: I had a small amount of money left.

Hans came to the station to see me off, trim and springy as ever, only a trifle put out.

It was almost the last minute. Had he no sense of what was fitting?

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He kissed me gently on each cheek, then presented me with a tin box with flowers painted on it. Within a few seconds it would be too late for a loving reconciliation. I made a special effort:

Der Tisch, das Messer, das Fenster, der Pflanze, der Zucker, der Hund, die Tür, Sie, Uns, I said triumphantly.

When I said 'us' he did not take my hands, and he was not impressed.

The previous evening I had managed to ask him what he was going to be.

'A professor,' he replied.

On that last muted morning I asked: a professor of what?

'*Turnkunst.*' Then, noticing my incomprehension, he substituted the familiar word, '*Gymnastik.*'

That was certainly some consolation.

He handed me into the train, found me a seat, fetched my bag, and without a word returned to the platform, where he stood saluting and bowing, until I was taken away from him. As a final gesture he fluttered his hand in the old way to tell me how quickly his heart was beating — but the show was over.

I opened the tin: inside was a rich fruit cake, and on a slip of grease-proof paper in careful Gothic characters the words '*Baking From My Mother.*' How exactly typical of Hans to write on grease-proof paper. Why couldn't he have bought one of those tiny cards with forget-me-nots painted around the edges to be found in any stationers? The grease-proof paper cheered me up enormously. I was so glad I had not given in. Anyway, how could I alter to please Hans or anyone else when I did not know

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what kind of person I was? When I might feel quite differently about everything tomorrow?

I was thoroughly, absolutely, out of love — if I had ever been in it.

Changing trains, and with an hour to wait, I met an odd-shaped creature with ears like a hound, a pointed nose, large chubby paws, and practically no legs. His low-slung body nearly touched the ground: his demeanour was patient, but not respectful. He had an absurdly long tail with a half-moon curve in the middle, lifting to a sharp point with a tweak of fur at the tip. He thrust his soft muzzle towards me, offering his face for my eager fingers. His family paused, allowing him to accept whatever attentions he required. Slowly, sensuously, he began to wag his tail, shook his long supple body vigorously, inclined his head in my direction, and walked on with dignity.

When I was once again in the train I thought about him. A hound? Not exactly. A basset hound? Nearly, but not quite. Of course, a dachshund! How perfect — how astonishingly what I had always wanted.

Far too soon I was at Aachen; it was already night time, and I bought a cardboard container of hot milky coffee on the platform before queuing up to show my passport, queuing up to change my few remaining Reichsmarks into English money. The station was dark, noisy, slightly disturbing. I crept into the third-class carriage and tried to arrange myself to fit the curve of the wooden bench-like seats. I was over the frontier: Germany behind me. Suddenly I was lonely and far from pleased with myself. Somewhere in the muddle of my mind I thought

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I had wasted time: I knew hardly any German. I had learned nothing — except, for a little while, how to be happy, and what kind of dog I wanted. Perhaps happiness is not only not knowing why, but not thinking, either.

Chapter Two

WHEN I returned from Germany a few days earlier than I was expected, my parents were away. Apart from the daily woman who was 'sleeping in' I had the house to myself.

I found a postcard waiting for me. For one second I thought it might be from Hans — although I doubt whether I had given him my address. It was from Laurie who was almost a brother to me, although a brother I did not see often. He would arrive on the off-chance on the following Saturday, and would it be possible for him to stay the night?

I told the daily woman.

'He's not going to *sleep* here, is he?'

I said that he might, gave her ten shillings, and coaxed her to a state of dubious resignation.

Laurie's father was my godfather, and was always known in the household as 'Uncle Jones'.

When I was about eight Uncle Jones gave me a dolls' house, small and fragile. I was seldom allowed to play with it, and never allowed to do so without supervision. Later it was explained to me that the dolls' house was a museum piece, too precious for a child's handling.

Generous, if misguided, he continued to give me

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presents. On my thirteenth birthday I received a five-pound note — this was immediately confiscated and returned to me in dribs and drabs which took the magic away. The following Christmas an interesting packet, complicatedly tied up and finished off with seals, contained an emasculated version of *The Arabian Nights*, with many coloured illustrations, dark blues, deep reds and gold, rich-looking, heavy to hold, and practically unreadable. When I was fourteen I received four or five of the duller works of Anatole France, indifferently translated, accompanied by a peremptory little note telling me to regard these as the basis of my 'permanent library', and that other volumes would be added year by year. Neither then nor since have I been able to read Anatole France.

I can hardly recall a time when Uncle Jones's younger son, Laurie, and I were not friends. He always spent part of his school holidays with us. I was encouraged to make return visits, but being a suspicious child I thought I was being pushed out of the way, unwanted, and I sat silent and sad, or suddenly burst into tears, and had to be sent home. At that time (soon after the present of the dolls' house) Laurie's parents lived in the Cotswolds, about a mile from the nearest village. London born, I missed the noise of traffic, and the sounds of people walking and talking in the streets. Even Laurie could not comfort me, being usually in need of comfort himself.

• Aunt Jones, a timid woman who spoke little, was seldom seen in the mornings; perhaps she was shopping, or preparing food in the kitchen. In the afternoons and

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evenings she stitched gros point. When her husband came into the room one could sense her fear; a fear so immediate and instinctive that Laurie and I reacted like animals, smelling out danger, and rushed away to hide in 'an out-house, leaving her to face the terror alone.

In the shadow of this fear, Laurie grew up, bracing himself to endure the possibly greater horrors of the adult world. Tight-strung, unsure of himself, always prepared for the worst to happen, he jumped when his father spoke to him, continually gnawed his fingers, took sudden fancies to brightly coloured scraps of linen filched from the rag-bags or to oddly shaped stones he had found in the garden, carried them about and fondled them, and when inevitably these treasures were snatched away he became shrill-voiced and unmanageable. Nervous on the surface, yet with an underlying anger at the treatment he was receiving, he tried to find a safe place for himself, and deciding there was no safe place for him, he determined to make himself unable to fit in anywhere.

Sometimes Uncle Jones accompanied Laurie on one of his holiday visits to us, although staying for a few hours only. As I grew older I listened to conversation not meant for my ears — and Laurie listened too. We gathered that Uncle Jones's other children were quite normal; he said so often. Jennie had married a market gardener. Living meagrely, toiling from sunrise to sunset on the borders of Wales, they were ideally happy, and Jennie's letters were almost lyrical when she described the hardships they put up with. Which, as Uncle Jones said, was just as it should be: a hard life hurts no one.

Laurie's elder brother, Alaric, an engineer, (a term

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conveying to us a vague knowledge of train engines), had settled in Canada. He had a Canadian wife, several children, and a car — a luxury in those days. He wrote kindly terse little notes for Laurie's birthday and at Christmas enclosing money orders to be paid into a post-office account, advising Laurie — but with less conviction as the years passed — that a splendid future awaited him in Ontario.

Uncle Jones had a small farm, no more than sixty or seventy acres. He had cows, pigs, a couple of hundred chickens, but what he specialised in was turkeys (these he insisted on looking after personally, saying they were awkward birds and must not be upset). Young and plump, as white and tender as capons, these always fetched the top market prices. He lived well, although he grumbled continuously. It was his intention that Laurie, who had no idea what he wanted to do — except perhaps that he was determined to 'escape' as soon as he was old enough — should help with the farm, and eventually 'take over'. Part of Laurie's school holidays were spent 'learning about the farm': but Laurie, who had grown into a tallish thin boy with a perpetually anxious expression and soft dark-brown hair that blew into his eyes, was easily tired. He found the early mornings hateful in all seasons, but especially cold and dark and dreadful in the winter. He tried and tried to milk the cows, but they gave no milk for him, standing unrelaxed and resentful whenever he approached them. The pigs became his friends, the piglets his brothers, and when they were taken to the slaughterhouse he wept, and when bacon was put in front of him he could not eat. Even the

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chickens died under his care. He fed them on mash and grain, called them, encouraged the weaklings, searched for eggs — but seldom found all of them — removed the sickly ones to retreats of roughly made wooden frames to keep them from being pecked at by the others, yet still they died; not only the ailing ones, but often perfectly healthy-looking chickens would be found stiff in death, scattering the meadow in the early morning.

On one of Laurie's visits when we were both in our early teens, he told me his mother and father had separated. From then on he had two homes — or no home at all.

'It's less awful in most ways,' he said. 'There isn't so much shouting — not in the house, anyway, father's always bellowing about outside — but they expect me to show I want to be with one more than the other. I can't, somehow. I don't like being with either, not any more. Mother's in Somerset with her brother and his wife (I suppose they're my uncle and aunt, really, but I've never met them so they don't seem like anything).'

Does she like it there?

'Not much — but better.'

He said his mother never wrote about anything that mattered, only about an old horse she'd taken a fancy to, and how the horse walked round the paddock with her, and was company.

This apparently worried him. 'I shouldn't think she'd care about a horse, would you? Perhaps the horse likes her.'

What's its name? I was anxious to make the animal near-human.

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'It hasn't got a name. It's just the horse, or mother's horse.'

I said I could see the horse, sad and loving, with huge soft eyes.

Laurie smiled. 'You are a baby' — perhaps he was two months older than I was. 'I bet it's a perfectly ordinary horse, rather horrible, with great yellow teeth and mucky eyes.'

When Laurie was nearly seventeen, and wanted to find reasons for not answering when he was spoken to, or sulking when he was reprimanded, he clung to the memory of the horse which suited him well.

'Of course I'm abnormal! How can they expect me not to be?'

Why?

'How would *you* feel if your mother was in love with a horse?'

I always giggled at this point.

'Oh, stop it! You wouldn't think it funny if it was *your* mother.'

She wasn't in love with a horse, that wasn't what you said, I protested.

'If it wasn't that's because I didn't know enough then. What did I say, anyway?'

You said the horse was in love with her.

'It's the same thing, isn't it? A horse doesn't fall in love without encouragement——'

Laurie looked cross.

Trying to please him, I said he wasn't a bit abnormal; in fact he was one of the nicest people, ever.

That made him crosser.

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'How *can* you pretend I'm normal? I'm twisted up, and everything's awful, and ~~no~~ one will ever care. All my life I shall ~~sedrch~~ and *search* and nobody will ever care.'

After we had had varying versions of this conversation, at last I learned not to contradict him.

Certainly at his father's house he was not greatly cared for. After his mother had gone, there was a succession of housekeepers with whom his father became a little too friendly, and one by one they left, usually managing to extract one or two months' wages 'in lieu of notice'. Years later Laurie told me he thought the 'village girls knew they were on to a good thing, and one after another offered her services and flounced off after a few weeks, pretending she had been 'insulted' or kissed on the stairs, or heard the handle of her bedroom door stealthily turned at night.

'Maybe it happened once,' Laurie said, 'and in a village everyone gets to know. Quite a paying game, I expect. A kind of near-blackmail that couldn't be proved.'

In spite of Laurie's evident distaste for the farm, and the fact that whatever he did had to be done again by somebody else, Uncle Jones was adamant: any boy could make himself useful if he put his mind to it. Besides, what else could he do? Even if he couldn't do that, what *else* could he do?

All Laurie enjoyed doing was painting, and as there wasn't much else to be seen he painted meadow scenes with trees in the distance in pointillistic style — all dots and dashes. He became so expert in his own peculiar

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way that the dots became larger, thicker, and angrier looking: the meadows were stuck over with poppies until hardly any grass was left, just red blobs. The trees were splashed with yellow markings as if they had all broken out in a rash of mad flowers. The sky was spattered with sealing-wax lumps of pinks and reds and purples; a segment of violent-crimson sun set with a doomlike light on the horizon.

Laurie gave me one of these pictures and I hung it in my bedroom, a cherished token of his special affection for me.

After leaving school Laurie spent a few months earnestly toudging around the farm, getting in everyone's way and writing to me in the evenings telling me I didn't know how lucky I was to live in London and that his father was always shouting 'Your mother's costing me more than I bargained for', and another housekeeper had left, taking the usual bonus.

Either Laurie had succeeded in reducing the farm to a liability, or Uncle Jones was tired of bribing housekeepers; the farm was put up for sale. Soon afterwards Uncle Jones and Laurie moved to a basement flat in a side street near the British Museum. Uncle Jones had decided to become a scholar. He announced that he had enough money to live on, but he would not be prepared, and indeed could not afford, to keep Laurie for more than a few weeks.

Laurie, elated yet terrified, wondering how he would manage to live, said his father was an old fox.

'That's what he's been waiting for all these years,' Laurie said. 'Now he's got it. Planning permission, or

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something — he hasn't sold the farm at all. It's all been cut up into building sites and he's made thousands.'

Every morning Uncle Jones, carrying a satchel containing sandwiches, walked briskly off 'to work' in the British Museum. I didn't believe he really went there until Laurie convinced me. At first, so Laurie said, Uncle Jones's research concerned the relationship of 'those two extraordinary men Fruit and Custard'.

What does he mean? I asked. Who are they?

'Froude and Carlyle.' Laurie did not even sound surprised.

Why does he call them that?

'Because he wants to be mysterious and he doesn't want anyone to know what he's talking about. Anyway, he seems to be going off them. Either he can't prove what he wants to, or someone else has already.'

What is it he wants to prove?

'That's a secret.'

You mean you can't tell me? Immediately I was interested.

'No, of course' not. I don't know. I don't suppose he does either. It's that kind of secret. Don't you realise he's mad?'

Really mad?

Laurie sighed.

'You are soppy,' he said. 'Not *mad* mad, just gaga, a bit off the edge. I expect it's because he's so old — I expect everyone gets a bit dotty when they're as old as that.'

This seemed perfectly reasonable. Uncle Jones must be quite ancient; probably that was why he never looked

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very clean and dropped so much food down his clothes. Poor old thing, most likely he was so old he couldn't find his mouth. Thinking back, I suppose Uncle Jones was then about forty-five — possibly a little younger.

One day Laurie told me he was going to stay with his mother.

'Perhaps she'll have some idea what I can do,' he said, not very hopefully. 'I can't seem to remember she ever did have any ideas, though, can you?'

Apart from his painting paraphernalia he took with him a large fibre suitcase stuffed with grubby pyjamas and dirty handkerchiefs, three shirts, not only dirty but torn, one pair of shoes, and a life of Vincent van Gogh. Laurie had decided to stop painting in little blobs; he was going to put the paint on with a knife and build it up.

At first I heard regularly from him, telling me his mother was just the same and hardly ever spoke. Now that the horse had died she kept bees and he hardly ever saw her except as a distant figure wearing a large hat with a white veil attached, pottering about on the edge of the furthest meadow where the beehives stood. He said his uncle and aunt were 'all right' except that they didn't understand art and he had had to waste a lot of time painting the garage doors because they thought if he could paint he might as well paint something useful. In a postscript he added — to me quite incomprehensibly — you wouldn't catch him cutting off his own ear, but he'd like to cut off other people's, and where he was the country was wishy-washy and somehow sometime he'd manage to get to France.

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Occasionally Uncle Jones came to visit us and grumbled monotonously about the British Museum. 'The officials', who were in league with some society intent upon preventing Uncle Jones's research, had refused to produce one or two rare books which were essential. Admittedly these books were not in the catalogue, but Uncle Jones had positive proof that they existed and he was convinced they had been 'secreted in the archives' because, having been forewarned of the nature of his research, the whole of the British Museum had banded against him.

My mother said, pacifically, 'Oh, what a pity.'

My father said, offhandedly, 'If you make a nuisance of yourself you'll have your ticket taken away.'

'Take my ticket away! I'd like to see them try. I'll have them closed down for withholding information, that's what I'll do.'

After a few seconds' uproar Uncle Jones agreed to 'shelve' the subject and began to complain about Laurie.

'If he isn't back soon and with some sense in his head he'd better not come back at all. I don't want to see him and he won't get another penny from me. And you needn't all stare as if I'm a monster. You wouldn't be any different if you had that boy and his beastly paints to deal with.'

On his next visit he said he had come to the conclusion that Froude and Carlyle were trivial men unworthy of his attention, and he was now engaged on a matter of historical research of world-wide importance.

'I can't say more yet. I must establish my claim first, mustn't I?'

While he talked he ate his way absentmindedly through

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mounds of food; as usual he dropped some of it over him and when the meal was ended he was always shoo-ed into the bathroom to sponge himself down.

Overcome by quantities of food he drowsed until tea-time, then he woke up and asked me what books I had been reading, and told me I ought to have been reading others. When we were alone he always managed to talk about Laurie, the loved and hated one whom he could not forget.

'You ought to know what he's up to, Marianne. You're near enough of an age.' He sounded as if he suspected me of having a key which I refused to hand over.

I'm sure he isn't happy, I said.

'Happy. Who's happy? I'm not — you're not, I dare say — no one is——'

I'm happy sometimes. Quite often, really.

It was a revelation to realise how often I was happy.

'So you ought to be at your age. You've got everything in front of you. But what have I got? First my wife leaves me, now my son goes off, and you tell me I ought to be happy.'

I didn't tell you. You told me you weren't. You said nobody is.

'She says she won't come back, either. Now what do you think of that, eh?'

I think she wasn't happy, otherwise she wouldn't have gone away.

'And why not? She had a comfortable home, good food, good clothes even if they didn't look worth tuppence on her, and a girl for the rough work. What more could she want? Buckingham Palace?'

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Laurie said you were always shouting at her. A sudden rush of anger forced the words out.

'Of course I shouted. Men have to shout. You won't get far if you can't put up with a little shouting. Does she think she'll break if a man raises his voice? She isn't made of glass no more than you are.'

Perhaps she couldn't shout back, I suggested.

'What nonsense you talk. Women don't shout back.' I do.

In my anxiety to prove this my voice rose to an agitated squeak.

Suddenly Uncle Jones laughed. 'You can shout at me because you don't care. When you find someone you really care for you'll whisper like all the rest of them.'

It was months before I heard from Laurie. Apparently he was wandering round the country painting inn signs. He wasn't paid much but he had free board and lodging. He said I was not to tell anyone, ever. Unfortunately no one ever asked me about Laurie so I was unable to keep heroically silent. Even Uncle Jones was bored with him and had become immersed in Hannibal, who, apparently, did not cross the Alps at all.

'I'm not saying much even to you, and nothing to those Museum people.' They're all hanging about hoping to get an idea to work on. I have to bamboozle them by ordering lots of books I don't want to put them off the scent.'

It was all very confusing and difficult to follow but evidently Uncle Jones had discovered that Hannibal died in Spain and his half-brother Hamilcanus crossed the Alps instead and continued to live as Hannibal.

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'What do you think of that?'

What I really thought was that it did not matter, but I dared not say so.

I asked, foolishly, whether the elephants went too. Uncle Jones was very cross about that and said of course they went too. What reason had I for supposing they didn't?

'They were all ready to go with Hannibal and everyone thought this man *was* Hannibal. D'you see?'

Even if they looked alike people must have felt they were different, I said.

'What people feel doesn't count,' he said.

• Yes, it does, more than anything else.

'All this feeling business,' he said peevishly, 'you're in for a pretty hard life if you keep on feeling so much and feeling what other people are feeling too.'

Hannibal was a poor substitute for Laurie. I'd much rather have talked about him. Hannibal had been dead for such a long time, and I did not like the sound of his name, and I felt sorry for the elephants, trudging all that way for, as far as I could make out, little reason.

And now, at last, Laurie was coming back.

At first sight he looked little different; still pale and slightly worried with mid-brown hair still falling over his forehead. He had acquired a practised smile which he bestowed carelessly upon the daily woman, with no good effect. He also had a trick of opening his eyes widely and staring hard at me before he let the smile take over. I found this disconcerting.

What are you trying to do? I asked.

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'I'm not trying to do anything.' He blushed easily. 'Except to find out if you're really pleased to see me.'

I'm terribly pleased, but there's no need to make peculiar faces.

He laughed then, and flung his arms round me, giving me the same cosy friendly hug I was accustomed to.

'I might have guessed you wouldn't be impressed,' he said.

I don't want to be impressed. I just want you here like you used to be.

'Darling Marianne, you're just the same, except you've got more freckles than ever — you're simply smothered in them, aren't you?'

We sat on the area steps in a patch of sunlight, eating ham sandwiches and drinking coffee. When we had finished I lit a cigarette and we did not talk, just held hands. Our palms were sweaty from the mid-day heat, our fingers greasy with ham fat.

At last we disentangled ourselves, and I wiped my hand on my skirt; Laurie wiped his on his trousers.

He asked me about Germany.

I said it was all right, in fact more than all right.

'I thought you always said you could tell me everything.'

Well, I can't. Anyway, it isn't you. I couldn't tell anybody — besides, there isn't anything to tell.

'Don't get angry and screw your eyes up. Heaps of things have happened to me and I can't talk about them either. I'm in an awful mess, and I can't even talk about that.'

Suddenly I was rather glad he couldn't.

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'Some day I'll be famous, you'll see, and everything will be . . . will be——'

Will be what? I asked flatly.

'Whatever it is when one's famous — haven't you any imagination? Perhaps you'll be famous too.'

How on earth could I ever be famous with all these freckles? I asked wildly.

'I'm going to be famous, anyway. I feel it inside me. Besides, there's nothing else for me to be if I'm not. So I must be.'

During those days we spent together we walked for hours around London, finding our way by secluded squares, over grimy bridges spanning side-canal, stumbling along cobbled alleys leading to hidden courtyards. We talked interminably through the quiet streets of the city on Sunday, continuing our endless chatter through the thronging mid-week markets. When the warm, soaking summer rain drove us to shelter, we went to the National Gallery or the Tate (or to any of the smaller galleries as long as there was no charge for admission — we had little money) where Laurie tried to teach me the delicate art of discrimination. What was the good of my rushing from room to room, anxious to see everything, noticing nothing? He showed me how to choose a painted face, a pale line of light, a fold of skirt, or a bright Tuscan sky and look my fill, and then go off with one small treasure safe in my mind. I did not find this method entirely satisfactory.

• Pausing dramatically in front of a folding panel he said that one of the sections must have been damaged and restored a couple of centuries later. 'That's evident, isn't it?'

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Is it?

'Just look at the quality of the paint — so thin and poor. Not rich and real and *stroked* on, is it?'

Fervently I agreed, and then he took my arm, and smiled. He took my arm too often and held it too tightly.

'I wish you wouldn't keep on wriggling away,' he said. 'It makes me nervous and self-conscious.'

It makes me nervous when you do it, I told him.

'I bet you're not brutal with yourself, so it doesn't matter so much. When I'm nervous I just lie in bed and tear my toenails off. Sometimes they bleed. All my toes hurt today. I can't bear to talk about it.'

Why do you, then?

'I thought you'd be interested. It is interesting, isn't it? It must mean something.'

Somehow I did not want to know what it meant.

Repulsed, Laurie became bullying, telling me I had no 'eye' for painting.

'Go on,' he said threateningly, 'tell me what you think of that.'

The canvas he chose was small and dark.

He pointed to a woman's hands, plump and pale with pointed finger-tips; loosely folded in front of her, the hands looked like precious possessions on loan, not completely belonging.

'Aren't they perfect?'

Before I went to bed that night I stood in front of the mirror and practised folding my hands in exactly the same way; but mine were small and square with blunted finger-tips, restless hands not intended for folding, at ease

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only when grasping a pencil, holding a book, or busy with a cigarette.

At that time I was unable to escape from myself. When we stood in front of paintings of beautiful women springing pink and warm and slender out of sea-shells, all I could think was how I wished that I was tall.

One afternoon our happiness suddenly withered. I had had enough of the National Gallery, and even Laurie admitted a few bus rides might be pleasant — if we had money to spare.

I sold two fans, one mother of pearl, the other ivory, and a tiny patchbox in Battersea enamel with these words on the lid:

*Where Love and Peace together Dwell
They make a Palace of a Cell
But when Discord rears its Head
Every Hope of Comfort's Fled*

Immediately they were gone, I wished them back. Discord had already begun to rear its head.

We spent some of the money on cigarettes, the remainder on cups of coffee, Bath buns, and bus fares. We sat in the front seats on the upper deck — which was open — whenever we could, and squabbled ineffectually for hours about 'art' and 'life'.

'You can't know anything until you've read all of D. H. Lawrence,' Laurie said.

• When I heard from my parents that they were returning the next day an instinctive knowledge of possible trouble made me tell Laurie he must go.

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'That's because of what my father's said, isn't it? I suppose he's put everyone against me. Just because he doesn't like me, and I don't like him. It's not fair.'

Although I denied this it was partly true.

When Laurie left he gave me a paper-bound copy of *In Defence of Pornography* — by D. H. Lawrence, of course. I found it dull and difficult reading, but I determined to defend my right to own it, and left it prominently on the sitting-room table where it could not fail to be noticed.

My mother — whose reactions could nearly always be relied upon — picked it up, glanced at the title, tore it angrily in half and threw it in the wastepaper basket. I stamped out of the house, bought another copy in stiff covers, and put it back on the table. Again my mother picked it up, felt the cover experimentally, marched into the kitchen and dropped it in the boiler.

Soon after that I left home.

Chapter Three

IN Bavaria I had found freedom, taking a small step away from childhood. I could not return to being ordered about. I had become self-willed, haughty when spoken to and — so I was told — ‘moody’. No doubt I was moody; often I acted a part, then suddenly decided that the rôle did not suit me, and changed to another, perhaps becoming a jumble of all the kinds of people I thought I wanted to be between luncheon and tea.

With just enough money to live on I found myself a partly furnished ‘flat’ — two large draughty rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom on one floor, with no front door except the front door common to all. There was no handbasin, and during the time I was there — eighteen months, maybe two years — I could not make up my mind whether to wash my hands and face over the bath or in the kitchen sink.

I moved myself, my books, a collection of unsuitable clothes of clashing colours bought haphazardly, some of them expensive, but nothing looking right with anything else, a few pewter plates and a pair of china dogs.

I was going to ‘write’. I sat for many hours staring glassily out of the window, unable to write a word.

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A few unintimate friends visited me, said 'what fun', and left as soon as they decently could.

The bed was secondhand, and I kept on wondering how many people had died in it. I bought an eiderdown half-price in a sale; the colour was a peculiarly harsh blue 'shot' through with green. One or two pieces of furniture were fairly new, unseasoned wood that warped; drawers and cupboards had to be violently banged shut and prized open with a knife. I broke one a week: it cost me quite a lot for knives.

I was given a large carpet. Once white, it had acquired a rubbed-in greyness — no cleaning could clean it. In the centre were the faint outlines of flowers; grotesquely intertwined, they looked as if they were trying to strangle each other.

Large as the carpet was, it covered only the centre of the sitting-room floor, leaving a wide edging of boards which the previous tenant had started to paint black. He must have become discouraged. I intended to finish the painting but I got no further than thinking about it. I knew just how he felt. Nothing could be done with that room except to sit in it as little as possible.

None of the doors fitted properly. Some of the sash-cords on the windows were broken, and those that weren't broken were frayed. To say that the place was draughty is to pay it a compliment. It was windy.

In the bedroom, apart from the over-sized sagging bed, a bow-legged table (one of my disastrous purchases) struggled to support a piece of marble (not cut to fit, but fitting near enough) I had had pushed on the top. This was my 'dressing' table and was invariably covered by

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the mess I always manage to produce: empty and half-filled powder boxes, worn-down lipsticks, some of them without tops (these had rolled somewhere and I seldom found them), unposted letters, old shopping lists and odd stockings, one or two books obscuring the swing mirror, including a dearly loved inexplicably singed copy of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (*See see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament. One drop would save my soul . . .*), bought for fourpence from a stall in the Charing Cross Road, and a Victorian children's book entitled *Grandmother Dear* — one episode of particular fascination described how Sylvia was lost in the Louvre and imagined she saw the lily-white hand of Henri Quatre beckoning to her from behind an arras.

Determined to live alone, although utterly unprepared and inexperienced, I had no idea of all the small details that must be attended to just to keep going — almost to keep alive.

Food was difficult enough: lighting and heating worse.

I had an old-fashioned portable electric fire. In the sitting-room were two power points, but the holes were not the right shape for the plug. Something would have to be done. While I mooned over this problem the first day slipped by until it was too late for anything to be done. A centre light in the middle of the room gave a ghostly radiance — not enough to read by with ease. Something must be done about that, too. But what? I could not even change the bulb — the ceiling was high and I had no ladder.

At first I met none of the other occupants of the house because I shelved my problems by not getting up until

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lunch time and going to the pictures in the evenings. Except in daylight I could not see properly to read, and if I had been able to see there was only one room warm enough to sit in — the kitchen — and that wasn't exactly comfortable.

During the first week I went to the cinema five times. After I had seen all the local films I took bus rides farther off. Occasionally I sat through the same film twice at different cinemas, only realising half-way through that I was not looking at 'something like' last Tuesday's film, but actually the same one. What did it matter? I was bored with them all, but I lulled myself into a trance, pretending I was 'thinking'; the kind of trance I had successfully practised at home whenever it was my turn to help with the washing-up.

Occasionally I read in bed by candle-light. I had no table lamp, and anyway there was nowhere to plug one in. Candles smelled awful and were also unsatisfactory because they grouped strange shadows in the corners of the large creaking-floored room. I went to bed with two hot-water bottles but often woke up chilled and stiff, with half the night still to be used. I spent the mornings in bed reading and eating apples if I could not bother to make myself any breakfast.

Eventually I evolved a programme of 'writing' in the afternoons. I sat in the kitchen which was moderately warm (often I left one of the gas jets turned on). Besides, compared to the other rooms the kitchen was comparatively tidy; smaller, the untidiness could not be on such a grand scale.

Hopefully I decided I must have been trying to write

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on the wrong paper; I bought several lined exercise books, a box of pencils, then I pinned back my hair so that it would not get in my eyes, and waited. Sometimes I closed my eyes and concentrated on 'seeing black' which I had heard recommended, but I could not remember whether as a cure for insomnia or a means of inspiration. I never found out because I did not succeed in seeing black.

Tenaciously I sat through many afternoons.

Perhaps I had chosen the wrong time of day? I forced myself to get up in the mornings.

Sometimes as a change from not writing I listened to the people upstairs who quarrelled with all their doors open. As none of the flats was self-contained it was almost impossible not to hear voices even just calling from one room to another. Sometimes I thought how dull it must be for the other tenants to have a nearly silent apartment like mine in the middle of the hubbub. The noise of different lives pressing so close and yet never touching mine was still exciting to me. I felt I was part of a new world, a small fragment slipped into the mechanism that had not yet joined up.

The people upstairs quarrelled before, during, and after breakfast. The woman screamed occasionally, the man spoke slowly and loudly, competing with the noise of frying or the whistling of the kettle.

'I know what you're up to,' he said. 'Don't take me for a fool. I know what you're up to. Always buying new underclothes.'

It was then that the woman screamed, a high note perhaps of exasperation, certainly not of fear.

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The first time I heard this I was intensely interested. I ought to be able to write about *that* — but somehow I could not think what. This depressed me even more: to have something to write about, and still not to be able to do it.

I could not resist buying books, mostly secondhand ones; the search was part of the pleasure; I spent many happy hours in dirty junk shops off the Euston Road turning over piles of torn magazines and discarded school books to find one small treasure; perhaps a selection of Robert Browning's poems, bound in green calf only slightly pockmarked by time, damp, or misuse, paying the sixpence or shilling I was asked for, and hurrying off, always half afraid that if I loitered I might be told the book was, after all, not for sale. Within an hour I had magicked myself into a different person with a toccata of Guluppi's — *dear dead women with such hair, too — What's become of all the gold? I feel lonely and grown old . . .* But when I began to feel lonely (though not yet grown old) I did not relish this so much, preferring *a bitter heart that bides its time and bites . . .*

The books piled up, some read and re-read, others hardly opened. I never seemed to have any money to spare for household equipment. Why bother? I would not have known what to buy nor how to use it. On Saturday mornings I swept the floors with the stump of a brush discarded by the previous tenant. I had no dustpan, and I doubt whether I knew what a dustpan was, so I brushed a lot of fluff and crumbs on a newspaper. This took me about an hour and was very tiring.

After three Saturday mornings of this a pretty girl

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with a pointed cat face, who shared the flat below mine with her brother, offered to lend me her carpet-sweeper.

She showed me how to use it, how to empty it.

How wonderful! I could hardly speak for pleasure.

When she laughed I felt a sudden joy because the laugh was actually in my room, part of me, for that was one of the sounds I had often listened to, a particular soft chuckle with a kind of coo mixed up in it, as if a wood-pigeon and some other bird were teasing each other.

'If you think it's so wonderful, why don't you get one?' she asked.

Yes, perhaps, sometime. I can't afford it just now, I said.

Involuntarily she glanced towards the ring I was wearing.

'Why don't you sell something? If you're really broke, I mean.'

Remembering the fans and in particular the patchbox, still greatly regretted, I said somehow I just couldn't.

'You'd better borrow the carpet-sweeper, then.' Immediately she accepted my idiosyncrasies and never referred to them again.

Soon we became fond of each other, Nell and I, and never before, perhaps never since, have I laughed so easily. Slovenly, late, laughing, we meandered through the days, talking a lot and doing very little. We were about the same age: Alfred, her brother, was a year or two older.

• Nell was always herself, never shut up in a cupboard of what other people might think, or how one ought to behave; her tears came as easily as her laughter. When I

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heard her weeping I used to rush downstairs to find, perhaps, that she had bruised her forehead on a kitchen shelf, or burnt her favourite saucepan, or left half a leg of mutton on the tiled ledge above the sink when the window was open, and a passing cat had stolen it. What she felt was always so clear and understandable that it was as much as I could do to prevent myself crying to keep her company.

We were young enough to speak the truth about trivial things — those minute truths which can often be so wounding.

Not until Nell asked me how I could put up with such horrible furniture did I realise how horrible it was. Then we looked at each other and laughed as if there were no other sounds we would ever be able to make.

Alfred's first greeting to me was: 'What a fug in here! Don't you ever open any windows? And you smoking all the time!'

If they're opened they won't shut again. Most of them are broken, I told him.

'Don't worry. I'll come up tomorrow and fix it.'

He did too. I doubt whether I even thanked him. From the first moment we met, Alfred was there to 'fix it'. Whenever I needed him I called down the stairs. If Alfred didn't reply I became fretful. What right had he to go out when I had just dropped my one remaining knife down the back of the cooker, or when the lights had fused, or when I thought I might have heard a mouse?

Soon I was accustomed to being called 'girlie' and remembered to answer to it.

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'Whatever are you doing, girlie, sitting staring out of the window?'

I'm writing, I told him.

'What for?'

Because I want to.

'What are you writing about?'

I said I didn't know yet. I hadn't actually started.

'You're a funny one,' he said, 'you ought to get out more and take some exercise.'

He tried to teach me to play tennis, but I used to send the ball so high in the air (if I managed to return it at all) that Alfred said he had forgotten about it before it came eventually to earth — outside the white line.

Sometimes I went with him to see all-in wrestling, but while he was shouting 'claw his eyes out, stamp on him, kill him' and jumping up and down with excitement, I looked away.

'You're a funny one,' he said again. 'Don't you know it's all put on? They don't hurt each other — not to speak of.'

I wasn't convinced.

Sometimes, as a treat, when Alfred could afford it, he took me to a dreary club (he had always wanted to belong to a club and now he had managed it) behind King's Cross Station, where we drank nasty concoctions of gin, white of egg and lemon juice shaken together in a tarnished metal container. After three of these I felt muzzy yet supremely sure of myself, but we both hated the taste of the stuff, and it never occurred to us to choose another, less unpalatable, drink. I believe it was the only one Alfred knew the name of, and I knew none.

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Dear Alfred, tall, slightly plumpish, his face flat and good-natured, all of a piece. I used him without knowing it — because I had not yet been used.

Deciding that perhaps Alfred was right, and I ought to take some exercise, I ambled around London, searching for Riceyman's Steps, Mary Wollstonecraft's grave, or, if I felt energetic to begin with, Swinburne's house in Putney. If I wandered far and the afternoon was ending, or perhaps had already ended, I felt like a strayed child, and I telephoned Alfred.

Oh, Alfred, is it you? Is it really you? (Sometimes if I found myself far out of my familiar circle I doubted whether I would ever get back again.)

'Yes, of course it's me. Who do you think it is?'

Oh, Alfred, darling. . . . I knew enough to know that he would be moved.

'Well, what?'

Are you terribly busy?

'Not so as you'd notice.'

I preened myself — when I telephoned Alfred was never 'busy':

I'm simply exhausted — and lost.

'What do you mean, lost?'

Not exactly — but exhausted anyway.

'Where are you?'

I looked out of the telephone kiosk and told him. A few seconds' pause while he wrote down the address. That was what I loved about Alfred: he was so reliable.

'Any tea shop, café, restaurant, where you can wait?'

There usually was. I had chosen my place of collapse carefully.

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'Go in there, and I'll send a cab.'

I could get a bus, I suppose, if I knew which one. Or maybe the Underground, although I can't actually see a station. . . .

'Bus or Underground!' he said. 'As if I'd trust you. You'd end up in Timbaktu, or just vanish, and I wouldn't put *that* past you.'

If you send a cab I haven't — I began.

'Don't tell me. I know. You haven't any money. You never have. Tell the driver to take you home and then come here, to me. I'll pay him.'

But Alfred, I oughtn't, you oughtn't. . . .

• My protests were weak, disembodied.

'Of course you oughtn't and I oughtn't. What does it matter?'

How much he gave me; not only in kind, but in kindness. With a careless murmur of thanks, and a wide smile intended perhaps for the world and not in particular for Alfred, I accepted everything. Sweet peas in December, marrons glacés, French cigarettes, long drives in the country to chic and often spurious little restaurants I had read about where Alfred, who liked a large steak, rare, with lots of chipped potatoes and a pint of beer in a pewter tankard, ate, to please me, messes of chicken cooked with candied apricots and prunes, topped by baked bananas, served on nests of saffron-flavoured rice, and drank indifferent white wine, under-iced and over-sweet, without a sigh or a complaint.

Dear Alfred: I never appreciated him chiefly because he had little sense of self-importance. Being young, I

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could not gauge the worth of somebody who, at least on the surface, did not value himself.

That first year seemed long and cruelly cold; the end of March and the beginning of April were freakish, borrowing a vicious wind from a northern winter. Huddled up over an inadequate electric fire, or crouching beside the open oven in the kitchen, I dreamed of warm weather.

Even Alfred, who was apt to prescribe knees bend, arms stretch, fifty times before breakfast, was sympathetic. He gave me a little fur tippet and a hand warmer — some kind of everlasting coal in a contraption of tin; he said it came from China.

'You'll never be able to stick this place, girly,' he said. 'Couldn't you go home?'

Oh no, Alfred, I couldn't. I've got to go on.

When spring came, and by then it ought to have been early summer, I felt more cheerful, and spent a long time trying to write once again. I did not get very far.

Thanks to Alfred's diffident help, I continued to eat well and regularly, although I had usually spent most of my allowance before the end of the quarter.

'We've been given a chicken,' he said, not looking at me, 'so you might as well come down and help us eat it. I'll leave these chocolates — Nell says she's getting too fat . . . Here, catch! I hate tipped cigarettes. I picked them up by mistake.'

Realising I had accepted far too much already, and that if I wasn't such a muddler I ought to have enough money anyway, I began to protest.

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'What's the matter with you now? You weren't so fussy before. Why must you go and spoil it all?'

I'm sorry, Alfred. I didn't think you'd take it like that.

'No, you don't think, do you? You're always keeping on about people not thinking, too.'

Sometimes overwhelmed by rage, or frustration, or both, he kicked about like an angry animal.

Alfred, *don't* — you get on my nerves.

Then he'd rush off, banging the door behind him, grumbling to himself as he stamped down the stairs. •

When the next quarter's allowance was transferred to my account I forgot the number of weeks it had to last, or the bills to be paid, and I felt quite rich. I decided to buy myself a present: a dog — the perfect dog — a dachshund. I bought dog papers, studied the advertisements. Dachshunds were not popular then and there were very few breeders. The advertisements were enticing yet depressing: puppies for sale hundreds of miles away; fifteen, twenty, twenty-five guineas. *Beautiful red dog four months old, delightful markings, inoculated, cheerful disposition, excellent companion, twenty guineas to good home.* I hadn't twenty guineas — it might as well be two hundred — and apart from unwavering affection, I doubted whether I could provide a well-bred dog with a good home.

'Couldn't you possibly have *another* sort of dog?' Alfred asked.

No. If I can't have the dog I want I won't have one at all.

'Talk about making life difficult! You really are the limit.'

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I'm not making your life difficult, am I?

'Yes, you are, moping about. You've properly messed me up.'

But what have I done, Alfred?

'You haven't done anything — not anything — you with your bits of poems and wanting to be a writer and your special dogs. You've upset me, that's what you've done.'

How?

'Just by being; talking, too.'

What so wild as words are?

'Oh don't start that, don't start!'

I started nothing, just sucked the end of my pencil and thought about the dachshund I could not afford.

I'd simply have to make some money. Other people wrote short stories and were paid for them. For hours I sat holding my pencil so tightly that a small corn came on my middle finger; I wrote a few sentences, but they never linked up.

At least one evening a week Alfred used to take me out to a small dance hall where Alfred, plump but light-moving, taught me first how to 'feather' sideways, until we evolved more intricate steps so that we could slip neatly between the other couples, enjoying the perfect rhythm and the beat of an unknown band, soon to be snatched away by a larger, richer establishment.

'Can't we go on, girlie?'

Go on to what?

'Go on like this?'

It was a bad moment for Alfred to choose. I was wearing higher heels than usual and my feet ached. The good

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band had left and in its place was a raggle-taggle trio of young boys, piano, drums and saxophone, who had probably never played together before; the floor itself had no 'spring' in it; the boards were over-polished in the centre, tacky at the edges.

I can't spend my life dancing in places like this, can I?

'It was all right last week, and it'll probably be all right next,' Alfred said equably. 'Besides, you wouldn't have to, neither. I'm doing better now, and better still, soon.'

Alfred had a tobacco and stationery shop, and was negotiating to rent another. Within a few years he *was* doing well. • Alfred was meant to make money.

• It's so dull, I said — and hated myself for saying it. Sometimes it's all right, but often it's so dull.

'You mean I'm dull, I suppose? If you do, why don't you say so?'

I don't mean that.

'Yes you do, and I don't know why I put up with it, honest I don't.'

Alfred darling, it's all my fault, and nothing to do with you. I'm all wrong for myself. I can't seem to get anywhere. I thought living alone would be so exciting, and I'd do so much . . .

'How d'you expect to get anywhere when you spend half the day in bed?'

I didn't today — Nell and I went out shopping.

'Some shopping!' He grinned. 'Everything except food.'

•
If I couldn't write short stories, there must be other ways of making money? Even Irena, the youngest of

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Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, found herself a job in the Post Office — although apparently she was not particularly efficient and tired easily: we had a lot in common.

Perhaps, as a beginning, I could learn to type?

I enrolled myself for afternoon sessions at a small 'business training college' a short walk away. Lethargically I accepted my limitations: I could not get up in the mornings.

With my fingers under a metal cover so that I could not see the keys, my wrists and my head aching, while a military march was played on a portable gramophone, somehow, after months of afternoons, I became moderately proficient. Now, perhaps, I could earn a little money, and if ever I found anything to write about I could type what I had written.

One late September afternoon I left the 'college' with a slip of paper clutched in my hand on which was written the address of an employment bureau. Within a few seconds I had lost this, as I probably intended to do. Who would want to employ me? I could type fairly well, but if told to 'hurry tip' immediately I lost my head. I had tried to learn shorthand, but even when I managed to write the outlines correctly I could not read them back; letterless shapes on a page could never mean words to me. I had been taught how to do filing, but any papers I filed disappeared for weeks.

I walked down the avenue of tired trees and noticed how the few flowers in the patches of front gardens looked dusty and faded; the leaves of the privet hedges were gritty from the belching smoke of the nearby railway. So this was Keats's season of mists and mellow fruitfulness?

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I felt sad, and lost and all alone, but in a Chekhovian slightly superior way. It was one of those autumn afternoons with a sky pale and clear as early summer, and the promise of a pink-hazed sunset. A disturbing hour of the day when one is suddenly conscious of time, and of oneself floundering about with a fifth of a century of personal years used up, and no one to be completely in love with except a Russian writer who had died long before one was born.

I walked home. Even Nell was out; she had told me she was going to the Caledonian Market to buy some geraniums. •

• If I could not write on such an afternoon, I would never be able to. It was the final test.

After washing my face and hands and making some coffee and lighting the oven, turning it to 'low', I sat at my customary place by the kitchen window, clutching my pencil, sometimes closing my eyes, waiting for the wonderful words to come.

Two hours or more later when Alfred bounded up the stairs to give me a pot of pink geraniums I had actually written several pages. Somewhere I had mislaid my original theme — if I had one — words were too precious to waste. I could not afford to cross a sentence out.

Look, Alfred! Just look! I'm writing, really writing! 'That's my clever girl.' Alfred gave me an affectionate push on the shoulder. 'Want me to go away?'

No, I can't write any more today. It's very tiring.

• 'What's it about, sweetie?'

Some cranes, I said vaguely, and a street like this one.

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When I said 'cranes' suddenly I thought of Chekhov — and then I tried to forget him.

'Cranes! Whatever d'you want to write about those ugly things for? What do you know about cranes, anyway?'

Not that kind: birds.

'What happens?'

I might have known Alfred would always want something to happen.

'Nothing much yet, I said. I'm just getting the atmosphere.

Alfred frowned. 'I've never seen any cranes around here, have you? Except in the zoo.'

Oh, what does it matter? I'm writing about what I imagine I see, not what *you've* seen.

'If you imagine you've seen some cranes they must have escaped,' Alfred said doggedly. 'And you ought to tell the zoo. They've probably been searching for them.'

I haven't seen any. The cranes are only in my mind. I made them up. "

'You needn't shout.'

I'm only shouting because no one understands.

'That lets me out, sweetie. I can buy and I can sell and I can sing "Knees up, Mother Brown", but if you want to be understood you'd better go to the shop next door. And talking of shops, do you want some fish and chips? All hot and greasy — I just went out to buy them. We've got nothing in the house but geraniums and we can't eat those.'

Yes, please. If there's enough.

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'Plenty: I counted you in. I want you to come down, really. I'd like to know what you think.'

What about?

'Edward.'

Nell's latest:

He nodded. 'She'll marry him. She'll have to, he's made up his mind.'

I said first I'd like to make up my face and change my frock.

'Mind if I wait?'

While I was getting ready I remembered how often Nell and I had talked about getting married, and when I admitted that I hadn't thought about it seriously she said:

'If you aren't going to get married you'll have to leave here soon. You'll never do anything in this place.'

Why? Although I questioned her, I knew she was right.

'For one thing the rooms are all the wrong shape, and these aren't happy houses,' she said.

The road wasn't a happy one, either. All the houses looked ashamed of themselves for being shabbier than they used to be. There were too many people in each house; unrelated people living almost elbow to elbow. Sometimes one felt that the fronts of the houses might begin to bulge with the strain. The railway made everything dirty, black smuts blew in the windows. It was worse in summer when the heat and the smell of smoke mingled with a city smell of dust, oozing tar from newly made-up streets, and sweat.

'I suppose it's all so horrid you could write about it

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before you go, couldn't you? I do like something slummy to read — especially over the weekends.'

I don't know what I could write about it, I said heavily.

'I thought writers were inspired and just had to write about everything.' She sounded surprised.

So did I — but they're not.

And after all these months all I had managed was a few pages about some imaginary cranes. And even those were Chekhov's cranes and not mine. All that time wasted: at least Nell had managed to make up her mind to get married. But then she had always known exactly the kind of man she wanted to marry and even — ever since she had won a third prize in a raffle at a Film Stars' Garden Party — what he would look like. The prize was a kiss from either David Niven or Ronald Colman, I forget which. Nell had received a soft impersonal caress on one cheek, a pat on her shoulder, and a compliment on being such a pretty girl. For a week she did not wash her face until she felt the magic had worn off. Having realised how wonderful tall dark men with small moustaches were, she decided she must marry one. In fact her heart was almost broken because only Ronald Colman — or David Niven — would do; but that was difficult to arrange, and she had to accept a stand-in.

She acquired a succession of boy friends, all pale copies, but somehow although their faces brought back tender memories, none of them had any enchantment, and Alfred, an insular type, muttered crossly about wops and dagoes and he couldn't understand what made Nell so potty all of a sudden.

Alfred rapped on the door.

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'Hurry up,' he said. 'The fish'll be frizzled. I've put it in the oven, and you know what Nell is— specially now — she just wouldn't notice.'

When at last I emerged Alfred grunted to show his approval.

What's he like? I asked. The same again?

Alfred shook his head. 'More like me,' he said.

That's all right, isn't it?

'No, it isn't. I know what I'm like and I'm not satisfied, but I *know*. He doesn't know and he couldn't be more pleased.'

Edward was shorter than Alfred and better looking, but not nearly as pleasant. He was the manager of a small factory that made motor accessories and he talked very fast about a new 'twin spotlight' he was on the point of patenting that swivelled up and down as well as sideways. He kept on saying, 'If this comes off we'll make a packet,' including Nell as if she was his wife already.

Nell's attitude was difficult for me to understand; a mingling of love and resignation as if all her life had led her to Edward and she could do nothing about it.

When we had finished supper, Alfred and I offered to wash up. We closed the kitchen door behind us; then we finished the dregs of the beer.

Alfred raised his eyebrows in my direction.

'They can't hear if we speak softly,' he said. 'What do you think?'

What can I think? I've only seen him for half-an-hour.

'He wouldn't be much different if you'd seen him for half a lifetime.'

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It's Nell's affair, I said. She chose him.

'No she didn't. He chose her.'

There's nothing actually against him, is there?

'And there's nothing actually for him, is there? He's a smart boy. He's on the up and up, and Nell's pretty enough to make all the bosses look twice and like what they see and come back again.'

She's nice too, I said. Don't forget that. She hasn't a sharp thought in her.

'So even the bosses' wives will like her,' Alfred said. 'She's ideal material. Soft as butter.'

It took me weeks to find out why I found Edward's presence distasteful, and why after ten minutes in his company the room felt wrong; one day I looked at him and suddenly saw Hans all over again — Hans without the uniform.

Gradually Nell and I did not see each other so often, and when we met we did not laugh as much.

Early one evening, sitting on the stairs where we often used to sit, offering each other cigarettes, some of the sense of ease returned, and I asked her why she had set her heart upon Edward who was so different from the kind of man she had dreamed of marrying.

She looked down at the engagement ring on her finger; three tiny flawless diamonds. Then she smiled.

'I've never fancied diamonds, either,' she said. 'They turn to paste on me. I'm not the diamond type.'

That's the type Edward wants, and you're going to marry him.

'Edward loves me, really loves me,' she said. 'No, don't laugh. I know what you're going to say. Lots of

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people love me. You love me; and when you get a dog you'll love that, and you love the cat next door, and you love Alfred too. And Alfred loves me, and he loves you, and if you get a dog he'll love that, and he's got a sort of love for the girl in the house opposite who always undresses in front of the window, and he's got another sort of love for that ape-like creature who calls himself Mick the Murderer and hasn't lost a fight yet — but Edward loves *me*, only ME. And I've suddenly found out that's what I need.'

There was nothing more to be said.

'Alfred's sure to get married,' she said, 'and you'll have your dog, I expect, and your books and wanting to be a writer, and some young man or other — and I'll have nobody. I've got to have someone of my own.'

At Nell's engagement party (Edward insisted upon one, he thought a marriage without an engagement party would be a hole-in-the-corner affair) Alfred and I stood apart, silently comforting each other. Edward's friends, self-satisfied young men connected with the motor trade, drank a great deal of beer and talked exclusively in their own little groups about exhausts and 'nice little jobs going dirt cheap'. Edward had provided a 'cup' for 'the girls'; a lowering mixture of sweet sherry and soda water with lumps of tinned fruit floating in it.

Perhaps only Nell, laughing and light-moving, really enjoyed herself. She was wearing a full skirt of biscuit-coloured satin cut down from an Edwardian going-away dress she had bought for a few shillings in the Chalk Farm Road. Over this she wore a short scarlet tunic, buttoning down the front.

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Edward, dark-suited, stolid and sure of himself, joined Alfred and me where we stood side by side, not quite holding hands.

Doesn't Nell look beautiful? Really beautiful? I asked.

'She's the prettiest girl I've ever seen,' Edward said emphatically, managing to imply that the word 'beautiful' was slightly indecent. 'Mind you, I always prefer women dressed in black in the evenings—it looks so good.'

'When you're married, I said, you can keep her in perpetual mourning, can't you?

'Yes,' he agreed solemnly, 'I can, and I shall, if I've any say in the matter.'

He walked off without a softening word.

Chapter Four

I SAW the advertisement in a local newspaper:

Young lady pleasant voice to answer telephone: able to type. Afternoons only 2-5.30. Salary by arrangement. Apply Messrs. Flask & Walk, 192A Trefoil Cutting, N.W.6.

I applied. To my fearful astonishment I was engaged. The pay was thirty shillings a week. I was not worth more.

Messrs. Flask & Walk turned out to be a Mr. Flask and his sister, Mrs. Walk. They ran an agency supplying typists, charwomen, part-time gardeners, conjurers for children's parties, and anything else they were asked for, if they could possibly provide it — on commission.

The business was run from a dingy flat of four small rooms at the top of a house overlooking a stretch of disused canal. All the houses were shabby although the neighbourhood had once been fashionable.

Mr. Flask wore a hairnet indoors; occasionally he removed it for 'interviews', otherwise only when he went out; then the hairnet was replaced by a dark grey felt hat with a wide brim. He was between thirty-five and forty. He had a long sharp nose and a habit of cleaning out his

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ears with a matchstick when he was anxious or flurried. He often talked about being 'got at'.

I had a small room to myself with a cheap deal desk, an elderly portable typewriter and a telephone, an extension of the one in Mr. Flask's room.

'First things first,' said Mr. Flask. 'You're not here to learn about my business. You're here to do as you're told and to keep people from getting at me. See?'

I nodded.

'The lavatory's one floor down and there's a washbasin and a roller towel which I'll thank you not to muck up because it's only changed once a week, but I don't want to find you always down there when you ought to be answering the telephone. See?'

I nodded.

'Now listen. If anyone asks for Flask & Walk say you *think* Mr. Flask's in — if I *am* in — and find out who's calling and come and tell me. But if anyone asks for Mr. Flask then you're to get the name but you're pretty sure I'm not in — in fact you think I've gone away and won't be back till next week. See?'

I nodded although I did not see.

'You can speak, can't you? Don't want anyone dumb, do you?'

Making some croaking noises, I convinced him that I could speak.

He sighed. 'Oh well, you don't smell and you're clean and tidy. More than most of them. And when I say you don't smell I don't expect you to smell, see? None of that scent stuff, mind. It brings on my asthma,'

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He called me Miss Brown — when he called me anything. He said he always called 'them' Miss Brown.

I resigned myself to this, deciding it was customary in the dreadful world of work.

The afternoons passed slowly; I seldom had enough to do. Mr. Flask wrote his letters in longhand and then I typed them. He had a florid business style and always begged to thank, and had the honour to remain. There were few letters; most of the transactions were arranged by telephone.

Sometimes everything happened at once and I enjoyed supplying messenger boys, or charwomen, collecting commission, answering the telephone, taking incomprehensible messages, sometimes putting five bob each way on a horse, 'and mind you remind them I get paid a fourth on the fourth — got that written down?'

After one dreary afternoon when no one wanted charwomen and Mr. Flask did not 'fancy' any of the horses Alfred came to fetch me. He said he wanted to have a look at the place. He waited outside and as I shut the door behind me I saw the appalled expression on Alfred's face.

'Lorluvaduck you don't half get yourself into some bloody pickles, don't you?' When distressed Alfred reverted to the language of his father who had, so Alfred told me, been a potman in a public house.

He grimaced at the dingy windows. 'Looks as if no good'll come of this,' he said.

For me the phrase became one of those compulsive arrangements of words that must be tapped on railings,

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stepped out on the pavement, or traced with a forefinger
in invisible letters on teashop tables:

*Looks
as if
no good
'll come
of this*

As I stepped out the words for the first time I tried to explain to Alfred what I was doing: Light with the left foot, heavy with the right. 'Looks' must be two syllables — 'loo-ooks' — otherwise the rhythm was immediately ruined.

Alfred never played such games. His square pleasant face was puckered like a puzzled dog.

'All this writing business'll send you off your rocker, girly,' he said. 'Keeping on and on about words. You ought to snap out of it.'

I couldn't and I did not want to:

*Loo-ooks
as if
no good
'll come
of this . . .*

No good did come of it, either. I was continually abused over the telephone when, as instructed, I announced that Mr. Flask was away and not expected back until next week — if then.

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My one near friend was the 'daily' woman who called herself a housekeeper. She was middle-aged and spoke with a refined accent: she had a long thin face and an expression of twisted disdain. This disdain carried her through the dragging fretted hours. She was always known as Finn. Her name was either Huckle or Berry, I forget which.

'Huckleberry Finn,' she explained in a bleak, bored voice, wiping up our cups with a damp grey teacloth. 'He thinks it's funny.' She nodded her head towards Mr. Flask's door. 'Little things please little minds.'

I asked what Mrs. Walk was like. I had struggled through a week of afternoons and still I had not met her. Some blessed afternoons I did not even see Mr. Flask. He left me a sheaf of instructions and a few letters to type.

'Oh her,' said Finn, 'she's sort of nothing, really. She doesn't count. My friend, Mr. Vale' — her voice altered when she spoke of Mr. Vale, and she took a long metal clip out of her hair, sucked it, opened the end in her teeth, and put it back again, skewering a clump of hair behind her left ear — 'well, he said he thought they wasn't brother and sister. He thought it was fishy — you know what men are, thinking the worst — though Mr. Vale less than most, if you get my meaning. But I said "no, she's his sister all right".'

How do you know?

'Wait and see,' Finn said. 'She's so awful. No one would want her for anything else. Not unless they were hard put to it.'

When at last I met Mrs. Walk she was not awful, just

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a nondescript woman who yawned a lot and often rubbed her fingers. Her circulation was bad. Clapsed in her arms was a large moth-eaten muff. The front was skunk, the pelt worn thin at the edges, the back brown velvet. The muff smelt faintly but persistently of disinfectant and stale urine. Inside the muff, moist-eyed and snuffling, lived a tiny middle-aged dog, half Pomeranian, half Pekinese.

Muff and dog were handed over to me.

‘You don’t mind looking after Pomkin, do you? I want to have a little chat with Finn.’

Must he stay in this? I fingered the muff gingerly.

‘I don’t mind where you put him so long as he’s not in a draught,’ Mrs. Walk said. ‘Be careful if you have him on your lap. His bladder isn’t strong.’

Weak bladder, moist eyes and a perpetual snuffle, Pomkin was welcomed by me, and I looked forward to the afternoons when he and his beastly muff were put into my arms. As soon as I finished my work I used to take him out on his thin silk lead and we walked together by the side of the dank canal. We paused at every lamp-post; Pomkin lifted his leg, swayed as if overcome by faintness, and immediately tottered on. More patient with dogs than with people, I talked to him explaining that he was not even trying.

You’re supposed to do it *now*, I said. You mustn’t wait until you get back into that stinking muff.

Pomkin lifted his oddly mixed little face towards me, his protuberant Pekinese eyes, his furry muzzle ending in a pointed Pomeranian nose, sighed deeply, bit his tongue as if perplexed, and staggered towards the next lamp-

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post, where, once again he lifted his leg, but all to no purpose. Defeated, I took him back.

'I'm sure I don't know why you bother with that insect,' Finn said. 'I don't blame you, though, it keeps your mind off things. I couldn't stand this place if I hadn't got something to look forward to, now that Mr. Vale has got rid of his wife.'

After sucking the metal clip in her excitement she had left it attached to her lip. Her voice was slightly muffled.

Did you say 'got rid of'? Fascinated yet repelled; I could not prevent myself from looking out of the window, staring down at the canal.

'Nothing nasty.' Finn removed the clip and replaced it in her hair. She's gone off with a man on the telephones — quite a family affair really because Mr. Vale works in the Post Office.'

Which post office?

'The one round the corner. He's bald with a face like Grock, but ever so understanding, not like a man, you know — you must've noticed.'

No, I hadn't noticed.

'And you in there every day,' she said. 'It's funny really what you don't notice, isn't it? I only said to Mrs. Walk the other week if we all stood on our heads I don't think Miss Brown would notice. Except for that smelly dog, you'd notice him all right. I don't know how you can bear that animal, that I don't.'

Are you going to marry Mr. Vale? I asked.

'If I get a chance, and when everything's arranged. And if he thinks he can change his mind he's got another think coming.'

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I'm sure he won't, I said hastily.

When next I went into the post office I saw Mr. Vale; he seemed to know me and he smiled. He had a soft owlsh face and boneless hands.

'You're the young lady Madge spoke of,' he said. 'And that's the little dog, I suppose?'

I was holding Pomkin under my arm — strictly he was not allowed in the post office. I had taken the precaution of wrapping his hindquarters up in an old scarf.

'Is he ill?'

Not more than usual, I said. He leaks. There's something wrong with his bladder.

Mr. Vale dropped several books of stamps.

'Did you introduce yourself to Mr. Vale?' Finn asked when I returned. 'He's always one for a chat. He's ever so interested in books and I said you were always reading — dry-looking stuff too.'

I admitted our conversation was brief. We had only discussed Pomkin's bladder.

When Finn was disturbed her long nose twitched.

'You shouldn't have,' she said. 'Mr. Vale's very fastidious. We've been friends now — well, more than friends, really, but nothing sexy, mind you — for over ten years, and I've never heard a nasty word pass his lips. That's more than you can say for most men. And that's what he didn't like about his wife. He told me in confidence, but, as I said, if he can't tell me, who can he tell? He felt she let him down. She wasn't *particular*——'

What wasn't she particular about?

'For one thing she always undressed in front of him, and her corsets weren't ever nice — not wholesome, you

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know. As I said to Mr. Vale, you wouldn't catch me doing that, not if you went down on your bended knees and begged me to. Besides I boil everything — there's not a stitch I wear I don't boil.'

I suggested it might be a good idea to boil the tea-cloths.

Finn was indignant. 'These old rags! You could boil them 'til the cows came home and they wouldn't be any whiter. They're not good quality. Irish linen, that's what I'm used to — not cotton. I've never been in a place like this before, and I wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for Mr. Vale just round the corner.'

Finn had to wait until I arrived at two o'clock before she could go out to lunch. Often Mr. Vale met her on the corner of the street and I watched them go off together. Nearly a head taller than he was, Finn had a firm grip on his arm and made him keep in step.

One afternoon when I left at half-past five I felt tired and hungry, and instead of going straight home I went into a nearby tea shop.

I was eating buttered toast and reading when Mr. Vale came in and asked whether I would mind if he sat at my table.

I had finished my toast, wiping up the oily butter with a scrap of crust before he spoke.

'Is your book interesting?'

Only in bits, I told him, admitting I could not understand it all.

• 'What's it about?'

It says if you want to be sad then you should hold a silver image of the moon in your left hand, but if you

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want to be happy you must hold a golden image of the sun in your right hand.

As soon as I said it I began to wonder whether people ever had such 'images' and who would choose to be sad:

Mr. Vale repeated the words to himself.

'Yes, that *is* interesting,' he said. 'That's the sort of book I like. Something to chew on — one sentence at a time, of course.'

He accepted the cigarette I offered, and made a great business of rising and walking round the table so that he could light my cigarette, although he could easily have leaned across.

'I suppose you and Madge often have little chats?'

When there's time, I replied cautiously.

'Has she ever said anything about getting married?'

Only that she would like to, I admitted.

He put his cigarette down on the ashtray, then picked it up again, fixedly regarding the tip.

'Expects me to marry her?' He drew at the cigarette and coughed, then he put it down again carefully, staring at it so that he should not have to look at me.

Don't you want to?

'I don't know,' he said. 'Does she think I will?'

You can't just yet, can you? Not until you get a divorce.

He sighed. 'She tell you that?'

I nodded.

'No reason why she shouldn't — I told her. It's a mess and no mistake.'

What's a mess?

'What I told her. I made it up.'

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You mean, your wife hasn't left you?

'I never had one,' he said. 'Never thought of it, really.'

If you aren't married, what made you say your wife had left you? You needn't have said that.

'I was upset,' he said. 'It wasn't long ago my mother died, that's why I was upset. I had to say something, didn't I?'

But why couldn't you say your mother had died?

'I don't know why I couldn't.' Then for the first time he looked straight at me. 'Yes, I do know: it was too real, somehow. Some things are so real you can't talk about them.'

This simplicity banished all images of silver moons and golden suns, and I stared back at him, wanting to tell him that what he had said was so true I might never have found it out, but the words would not come.

'I had to make up something to show why I was upset, didn't I?'

I nodded.

'I can't imagine being married,' he said. 'I wouldn't mind going on as we've been . . . but getting married, that's another step, isn't it?'

Couldn't you, I began diffidently, couldn't you perhaps get married and go on as you are now?

'You mean . . . you mean do nothing else?'

Yes, that's what I mean.

'*Exactly* as we are now?'

Not exactly — you'd share a house, or flat, or wherever you live . . .

'What would Madge think?'

You'd have to find out. You'd have to ask her.

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'What could I say?' He stirred his tea violently.

What we've just said, I suppose. That you'd like to marry her, but go on as you are — no other relationship.

'No other relationship,' he repeated obediently. 'I don't think I could, I really don't.'

Why couldn't you?

'I couldn't trust myself not to make things up, like I always do.'

About your wife's corsets, you mean?

He gave me a sad yet singularly sweet smile.

I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that.

'Oh, but you should. It's what I need. Somebody to speak natural. I didn't make it up about the corsets. It was in one of the novels I used to read to mother. She was beautiful right to the last, and then she died and I let her go and never went to look at her. They told me she was all laid out and ready and I never went up. I couldn't, somehow.'

Of course you couldn't.

'You don't think I ought to have done, then?'

It wouldn't have made any difference, would it?

'Only I'd have known she'd really died, now I can't face it. She's neither here nor gone, just where I can't see her in the corner of the room at night.'

She loved you, I said, so she wouldn't want to frighten you, would she?

'Sometimes I think she'd rather frighten me than lose her hold,' he said.

You'd better marry Madge, I told him. She'll be able to keep the shadows away.

I felt brave and sensible while I sat listening to Mr.

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Vale's stories of ghosts and apparitions and bells that rang where no bells were, but I forgot I had to go home and sleep alone; the night seemed darker than usual, and very long. For once the city was a desperate and dreadful place; the street outside my window was too quiet and unnaturally deserted, but when occasional footsteps could be heard the sounds were more menacing than the silence. About three o'clock in the morning I got up, lit a cigarette, and stood by the window, watching and keeping guard. Watching and keeping guard, smoking cigarettes, there I stayed until the thin light of dawn had dimmed the street lamps, and the shadows had been chased out of the corners, and the room was gradually taking on its daytime shape again, and then I was able to go back to bed, and at last to sleep.

For nights afterwards in my mind I saw Finn and Mr. Vale (still Finn and Mr. Vale) lying side by side, chilled and uncomfortable, and in the furthest corner of the bedroom the pale ill-wishing shade of Mr. Vale's mother stared down on them, and smiled.

I began to walk a quarter of a mile away to another post office, and I never returned to the tea shop. I did not want to encounter Mr. Vale again; he had become part of my nightmare — and I thought it possible I might have become part of his.

Loo-ooks as if no good'll come of this . . . I stepped out the words more frantically — and to my shame much oftener — on the pavements. I took against the canal, cloudy and deep and stagnant.

Even Pomkin was not there to console me. For many afternoons I waited for him; at last I dared to ask Finn —

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who had lately become silent and unfriendly — what had happened to him. She told me Mrs. Walk had gone to Brighton for a few days and had taken Pomkin with her. I very much missed too what Finn used to call (in her more cheerful and less ladylike moments) a natter and a cuppa in the kitchen. Now instead of calling me into the kitchen when tea was made she brought a cup to my drab little room, and left me alone with my tea, the typewriter, and the telephone.

‘Alfred had deserted me too; he had gone ‘up North’ for a few days to look at a little shop he was thinking of renting.

‘A new parade, girlic,’ he said. ‘Nothing doing yet, but plenty soon.’

At last I was so miserable I could not stop myself appealing to Finn.

‘What’s the matter, Finn? What’s the matter?’

She looked towards, but not quite at, me, twitching her nose.

‘What’s the matter? There’s always something’ — take your choice.’

Once or twice Nell came up and had coffee with me in the evenings, but she was always glancing at her watch, worried in case Edward called for her and she was not there. Her fear shivered through me.

Oh how can you bear it? I asked. You’re frightened of him now, and when you’re married it will be even worse.

‘Yes,’ she said calmly, ‘I expect it will. I’ve told you why — he loves me. Besides I’ve built this whole thing up too high to draw back now. You don’t understand

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at all. You can't until you've felt it, then you'll know what I mean. He loves me, but I'm not what he wants. If you find someone who wants you, as you are, you'll be lucky — if it ever happens.'

If it ever happens . . . for once I doubted whether it would.

I seldom opened my books, and even the lilt of poetry had left me because whatever I read I could only think of in my own terms: *And yet God has not said a word . . .* that was certainly true. . .

Some move must be made. But what? One small move was within my power: I would leave Mr. Flask. Those lonely slow-houred afternoons had become intolerable to me.

I told Finn first: she was not surprised.

'I thought you'd go, the same as the others,' she said. 'About time too. He'll have to hop it soon himself. Owes money everywhere.'

How do you know?

'How do I know! You're a simpleton if ever there was one. Why do you think people keep on ringing up and asking for him and getting rattled when you say he isn't here?'

I hadn't thought, I admitted. (I had thought and decided the telephone calls were part of that mysterious and dreadful world of 'business' I could never fathom.)

'You'd better give in your notice and get your money quick,' she said. 'I'm off soon myself. Catch me staying 'til the bailiffs come and all the furniture's moved out. Not likely.'

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What about Mr. Vale? I forced myself to ask the question.

Her expression was stoical.

'Oh, him,' she said. 'It's all off. His wife's back.'

Oh no, Finn, no! But that's impossible——

'What's impossible about it? They generally do, didn't you know? Come back, I mean: wives.'

I'm sorry, I said. I'm awfully sorry.

'No need to be. I ought to have known better. I somehow didn't think it would happen — me getting married. I wish, though, I could have gone on thinking it might — even if it never did.'

Can't you go on thinking? Mightn't it happen, even now?

'No,' she said. 'Once they're back, they're back for good.'

When I 'gave in my notice' Mr. Flask did not protest; in fact he did not appear to be particularly interested. After I had been paid I walked to the barrow in the next street and bought a dozen pink roses; the petals were limp and thin but sweet-scented, the stalks too fragile for the heavy heads of the flowers.

At the ironmonger's opposite I bought two pingpong balls; white and nearly as light as air, they bounced high when I dropped them on the pavement. I took my purchases back to Finn.

When I gave her the roses she thanked me with a wretched distracted pretence of pleasure, wishing perhaps that I had not been the one to give them.

These are for Pomkin when he comes back, I said. I thought he might like to play with them.

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Finn took the pingpong balls in her large hand, holding them tenderly as if they might break. She seemed more pleased with those than with the roses. '

'I won't forget,' she said. 'You always were a one for that smelly dog.'

Chapter Five

REMEMBERING Pomkin, and trying to forget the muff, I renewed my efforts to find a dachshund. Through someone who knew someone who knew someone I was introduced to a Polish woman who was on the point of returning to her own country. She had one dog puppy for sale.

How much? I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. 'As much as possible, naturally.'

I offered her five guineas — cash, I added desperately. I had already seen the puppy and longed to take him home with me.

Her laugh was harsh and unpleasant.

She picked up the tiny creature roughly, but no doubt scientifically, by the loose skin of his neck, let him dangle for a second or two in the air, his large paws trying ineffectually to find a foothold, then flung him down on my lap. His pointed nose pushed itself into the palm of my hand; after a preliminary puppy tremble he sighed contentedly and fell asleep.

Seven pounds, I said.

We argued for a few minutes, but when it became evident I could pay no more, the offer was accepted: Nicholas was mine.

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He was the dachshund I had so often thought about, and as perfect as I knew he would be. Long and slim, his short silky fur fawn-coloured with a darker streak down his back; pencil thin at his neck, the streak widened to a soft charcoal line towards his tail. His paws were chubby and wrinkled as if he was wearing large floppy gloves. He had frowning lines on his forehead. Looking worried, he was in fact a most carefree dog; loving but not over-dependent, playful, alert. He grew up to be a great carpet-cleaner, licking and sucking to pass the time while I sat reading or typing. When he required attention he panted loudly and put his tongue out, and if still I did not talk to him, or take him out, or give him his bowl of milky tea, he stamped peremptorily on my feet.

In the evenings Nicholas slept deeply and serenely, but he objected to being left alone for long in the day-time. I had to find some job I could do at home — although home was less homelike than ever, apart from the boundless pleasure of Nicholas's company. Nell, already married, and living south of the river, seemed in every way out of my reach; Alfred was on the point of moving.

I asked Alfred's advice about a job; occasionally he came to see me, or perhaps to see Nicholas more than me. I knew, or sensed, that even when Alfred was with me, I had already lost him.

'I'll see what I can do,' he said heavily, making no promises as he would once have done. After a week or two I received an introduction to a friend of Alfred's who was somehow connected (in what way I never found out) with a film studio. I was given some film

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scripts to type at home. The typing was tedious, and not particularly well paid, but at least I could keep Nicholas company.

Except for Nicholas I was often alone; Nell wasn't there any longer, Alfred was nearly always out. I ate erratically, caring little; opening a tin of baked beans, heating them in a saucepan and turning out the tomato-coloured mess straight on to my plate, spooning the food absentmindedly into my mouth while I read the book propped up in front of me on the kitchen table. Comforted by Nicholas's presence I had gone back to my books. There was so much to read. Why should I waste time cooking? Why should I bother to lay the table? I prepared Nicholas's food carefully — that was different. He had his own matching plate and bowl with DOG written on each. I had any plate that came first to hand from the rack above the gas cooker.

I made a lot of coffee — otherwise I drank water.

If I was exceptionally hungry I tried to make my hunger coincide with one of the days when I had to collect a batch of scripts for typing and on the way back I stopped at one of the smaller café-restaurants in Soho and ate an enormous meal very quickly (remembering Nicholas probably whining at home). Afterwards I usually felt sick.

Everything, apart from Nicholas, was dreary, and whatever went wrong in the flat I had to have put right; Alfred was seldom there to 'fix it' any longer, and if he was there I did not like to ask him.

It wasn't until Alfred was on the point of getting married that he told me he loved me.

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'But I suppose you've always known it really, haven't you?' He stood with his back to me, facing the window.

Of course I didn't. How could I?

'Why did you think I did it all, then? Waiting around in case you needed me?'

Because — because you were fond of me — and kind.

'Am fond of you,' he said. 'Kind? More or less. Can't be bothered not being. It's natural.'

Yes, whatever Alfred did was natural.

How could I begin to *imagine* you loved me? I asked.

'I oughtn't to have expected you to see it,' he said. 'You'd be the last person.'

Why?

'Because you wouldn't be looking for it, that's why.'

No, of course I wasn't looking for it.

'You could have seen, though, if you'd taken the trouble.'

No, I couldn't, not possibly, because—— I hesitated.

'Because what?'

Because it never occurred to me to fall in love with you, I said.

The words sounded flat, almost insulting. They were not easy to say, either, although easier than lying to Alfred at that moment.

'That's got nothing to do with anything. And don't be so silly talking about *falling* in love. I didn't. It came on bit by bit. I just love you, that's all.'

You mean you did?

'Did and do.' He turned round.

Now you're being silly, I said. You're going to get married and you'll be perfectly happy.

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'I shan't be unhappy, so don't you think it.' He sounded angry.

Don't pretend 'I want you to be unhappy, I said.

'Well, you must've wanted it, otherwise you'd have said yes or no before this, not kept me hanging around.'

How could I say yes or no when you didn't ask me?

'And you're supposed to be intelligent! You ought to know what's going on, and you ought to know what you want. Now Bessie's an ordinary girl but she knows what she wants, and I don't care much either way — but *she* knows and that's why we're getting married.'

Oh don't keep on saying 'she knows, she knows', it's intolerable.

'So she does know,' Alfred said, 'and you'll hear it whether you like it or not.'

Suddenly I felt quite ill, and I told Alfred so.

'Go on, feel ill. You'll always feel ill when you don't know what to do next. . . . Want me to take the dog out?'

Yes, please.

He called Nicholas; the dog jumped up at him then rushed off to fetch his lead, a trick Alfred had taught him.

After they had gone I just sat and tried to think, but most of the time I was feeling, and what I mostly felt was self-pity.

'When Alfred brought the dog back, clumsily I tried to make amends.

You've always been wonderful, Alfred, I said.

He sat on the arm of my chair and held my hand.

'And so kind. Don't forget that, will you?'

Don't tease me, Alfred. I shall miss you terribly.

'Yes, but you don't really mind, do you?'

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Mind what?

'My getting married.'

Of course I mind.

'Not in the way I mean.'

And if I did?

'Well, it's a bit late——'

Exactly.

'If you really minded, I'd do something.'

What would you do?

'God knows. Isn't this just like you, at the very last minute.'

Oh, get married, what do I care! What's Bessie like, anyway?

'Like a lot of other women, more than you'd think. She just goes on cleaning and cooking and making herself dresses that don't really fit.'

Does she love you?

'Of course she doesn't! What a daft idea. She wants to get married and she's fond of me. That's all there is to it.'

Don't you want her to love you?

'Not likely! I'd have to pretend to love her back, wouldn't I?'

Would you?

'You're supposed to have been brought up nicely and you've no idea of manners, have you?'

But it isn't manners to pretend to love someone if you don't.

'And it isn't manners to make someone miserable, is it?'

Oh no, Alfred, it isn't. You're so right you make me sad.

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'I don't make you sad,' he said roughly. 'You make yourself sad. You've never even taken the trouble to find out about yourself. No wonder you can't write about other people.'

Where did you read that? I asked nastily.

'I can't read, sweetie, didn't you know?'

After that evening I did not see Alfred again for weeks — not until after he and Bessie were married.

They were married in a register office, and I believe only Nell and Edward were present. Alfred sent me a message by Nell saying that he had not invited me because he didn't like the idea of my being there, just standing and staring.

We, Nicholas and I, received our first invitation to dinner a few days after Bessie and Alfred returned from their honeymoon.

The lamp standard I had given them was so prominently displayed that it seemed to fill the whole room. Nicholas began to paw the floor with kittenish movements, conscious, perhaps, that Bessie did not greatly care for dogs. Nicholas, she said, seemed 'all right', but all animals, especially dogs, were 'a tie'.

Eventually I suggested that for the time being it might be better if the lamp could be put in the corner.

'That's where it goes,' Alfred said. 'It was Bessie's idea to put it out.'

'I always think it's nice to see gifts appreciated, don't you?' Bessie was tall and slim with shining brown hair; the curling tips rested on her shoulders. She was proud of her hair, but never certain how to present it at its best.

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Sometimes she grabbed a handful of locks and arranged them over one shoulder; then suddenly she decided to push the thick falling masses behind her ears. She pretended to listen while Alfred and I talked, but she was continually preoccupied with her hair. If we asked her questions or in any way tried to draw her into the conversation she selected a strand of hair and nibbled at it thoughtfully before replying — if she replied at all.

Once Alfred said, 'Why must you fidget so! Can't you leave your hair alone?'

She pouted, sulked for a few seconds, folded her hands in her lap and sighed. Soon she forgot and began to rearrange her curls all over again.

When she had gone to 'dish up' Alfred told me it got on his nerves, all that fiddling about.

I said I was sure she would grow out of it, although I had no reason to suppose so, and as far as I know she never did.

'When she goes to bed her hair's all pins and bits of paper and rolled-up pipe-cleaners,' Alfred said. 'It's enough to put anyone off.'

And does it put you off? I knew we were behaving badly, but I could not resist the question.

'Not always.'

We waited, a little ill-at-ease, for Bessie to come back. Only Nicholas was entirely relaxed; his long body stretched across Alfred's knees, sleeping. In his sleep he sucked his tongue.

The dog's nose twitched occasionally and he gave little excited yelps under his breath, then settled down to suck his tongue again.

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He's dreaming, I said: probably of squirrels. That's the sort of noise he makes — only louder.

'It wouldn't do for me to have a dog,' Alfred said. 'I'd get too fond of it.'

Bessie returned carrying plates piled with roast pork, baked potatoes, brussels sprouts and apple sauce.

Alfred rose, lifting Nicholas in his arms, and placed the still drowsing dog on a chair.

'Bessie's a damned good cook,' he said.

• That was important. She was, too, although she gave me so much food that I was eating long after the others had finished.

When dinner was over we played Pelmanism, very slowly and badly; stuffed with food, we could not concentrate.

When Bessie left us to make coffee, Alfred held my hand.

Don't you ever go and help her? I asked. She isn't just making coffee, she's washing up, too. All those greasy plates and tins and saucepans.

'No, I don't ever go and help her. It doesn't do to start that. She'd only get to expect it. Don't you go, either. That's what I married her for. Not only, but mostly. Besides she's got to have something to be proud of. She's proud of cooking and getting washed up and all the kitchen tidy while we sit here, doing nothing.'

I remembered how Nell and I used to gossip and laugh on the stairs, and Alfred coming home to lunch to find only a lump of cold pie left over from the night before, or boiled eggs and a couple of slices of toast re-heated from breakfast because Nell and I had laughed and

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talked so much that Nell had forgotten to buy any bread.

After that haphazard household perhaps all Alfred cared about was a well-run home, polished furniture and shining floors, windows that could always be seen through, golden brasses without a smear or fingermark, and plenty of roasted meats and boiled puddings.

I asked him whether this was so.

Alfred looked at my hand which he was still holding, then dropped it back on my lap.

'If I can't have what I want, at least I'll live comfortable. You can muck up my mind, but you can't muck up my life.'

Do you think I've mucked up *my* life?

'As good as,' he said. 'Then you don't care like I do. You care a lot in some ways, but no one would know what you mightn't do next because you don't mind trying things out, just for fun.'

I felt he could have phrased it more kindly.

'What are you two chattering about?' Bessie asked brightly, bringing in a large pot of weak coffee and a jug of boiled milk.

Alfred's just been telling me I've mucked up my life, I said.

'Alfred! You oughtn't. It's so rude. And no business of yours, either.' Bessie sounded shocked.

Alfred stared resentfully at her. 'What's my business is my business and no business of yours,' he said confusingly.

Nell might have screamed, probably thrown something at him, then burst out laughing, all rage forgotten.

Bessie merely arranged her face in an expression of

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martyred self-control and continued to pour out coffee, laddling sugar into all the cups, mine included — I do not take sugar.

'You mustn't take any notice of him,' Bessie said at last, as though she was giving me a present. 'He just talks for the sake of talking. I never listen.'

'Think I'll take the dog for a stroll,' Alfred said.

'Won't you have some more coffee? You always do.' For the first time Bessie sounded anxious. She was not concerned with his mind, but she did expect Alfred's stomach to keep to a routine.

Alfred shook his head.

'You might as well feed the dog before you take him out, His plate's all ready.'

Alfred smiled affectionately at her, and she returned his smile; they were united again.

When we were alone together Bessie ceased to stiffen herself against me, and confided that she was only just getting Alfred 'back'.

What do you mean, 'back'?

'Back to what he's meant to be, having something to work for, really getting on. That sister of his, she's nice enough, but so head-in-the-air, isn't she? Goodness knows what she'll do now she's got a house to run. She couldn't even keep three rooms looking decent.'

I said, weakly, that I was awfully fond of Nell and we'd had lots of fun together.

'Fun's all very well in its place, but there's no need to be so sloppy. Alfred often wore odd socks. Catch me letting him do that. Nothing got mended. I don't pretend to be perfect but I always do my best, and I'll see

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he does his, too. He hadn't got any incentive before . . . It's funny being able to talk to you. I thought you'd be peculiar, but you're not.'

I said I was glad.

'Alfred said he didn't think you were keen to get married.'

I might, some time, but I'm not exactly keen to.

'Don't you want children?'

I'm not sure — not yet, anyway.

'I want lots and lots.' When she said this her expression altered. The set of her lips and her smooth-skinned oval face suddenly reminded me of a painting of the Annunciation which used to hang, for no particular reason, in the cloakroom at school. Bessie might not be as easy to handle as Alfred imagined.

Alfred was out too long for my liking. By the time he and Nicholas returned Bessie and I had nothing more to talk about.

After one or two exchanges of visits, we ceased to see each other. There was no point in it.

Chapter Six

PERHAPS losing Alfred was more of a loss than I had realised. Not that I wanted him for myself, but I resented his belonging to anyone else.

The film scripts seemed to be more difficult to type.

I longed to go away from London, if only for a little while.

During my schooldays my parents used to rent a house by the sea for the summer months. When we had visitors for the weekend my bedroom was needed, and I stayed with a Mrs. Dean, a widow in the same village, who let a room occasionally when she 'fancied' doing so. She had one daughter, Thelma, with whom I had been very friendly in my self-preoccupied way. Although Thelma was about ten years older than I was, the walks we took together were chosen by me, and for the most part I talked, and Thelma either listened or pretended to. She was a self-effacing young woman, without much vitality, and I was presumptuous enough to feel that by giving her my company I was conferring a favour.

I thought about Mrs. Dean's cottage practically on the edge of the seashore, with its two worn stone steps leading straight into the living-room, and the surprise of the cupboard door opening to reveal a steep curving staircase to the three low-ceilinged bedrooms above; the cries of the

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gulls in the mornings, and the soothing continuity of the sea rising in edges of foam to beat against the white rocks, mussel and sea-weed coated.

I wrote to Mrs. Dean, asking her diffidently whether she would accept me as a paying guest. In a postscript I mentioned Nicholas: 'a small dog, well-behaved, please may he come too?'

Thelma replied: her mother was willing to let me stay for a week. She mentioned a modest sum to include breakfast and supper, and in a stiff little sentence at the end said she was looking forward to seeing me. She too referred to Nicholas in a postscript: *Mother isn't very fond of dogs, but if he's well-behaved and not large I expect it will be all right. You can leave him with me sometimes in the shop if he doesn't bite.*

I had forgotten about the shop; a tiny place hardly more than a window and a counter, with shelves holding knitting wools, knitting patterns, and needles. Once it was kept by Thelma's mother, and now, I suppose, Thelma ran it.

Nicholas, a gentle dog, not only did not bite but was, I suspected, quite incapable of doing so. His most blood-thirsty performance was an ineffectual effort to catch a spider picking its bow-legged way in and out of a pile of dead leaves on the Heath. Nicholas, his forehead wrinkled and perplexed, his long pointed nose pushing at the leaves, tracked the spider, occasionally putting one heavy chubby paw where the spider had been a few seconds previously, then suddenly made a brave leap, by mistake found the spider, snuffed at it experimentally to see if it was edible, then with a quick revulsion blew the spider away, and

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ran whimpering back to me, appalled by the horror of the thing. The spider, unhurt, scuttled off.

During the train journey, 'with Nicholas, nose hidden in paws, ears down, shivering a little when he woke and found himself still shut up in a small room with a floor that vibrated, I tried to remember all I knew about Thelma whom I had not seen for four or five years, and who had always been to me a summer person, someone to talk to during the holidays when, selfishly, there was no one else.

Thelma was tall, too thin, her face pale, and I could not recall the colour of her eyes, perhaps grey. She had fine-textured red hair, neither short nor long, falling softly around her face, occasionally getting caught up in the collars of the shapeless cardigans she always wore over summer frocks. Her voice was low-pitched and pleasant to hear, but died away at the end of sentences, as if she doubted her right to speak. When amused she gave little explosive shouts of laughter, quickly putting one hand up to her mouth, as if she had no right to laugh, either. I remembered her winding up a portable gramophone, and I could still hear the sad thin notes of a violin; in my mind she became linked to the kind of music I knew nothing about, formal stilted sounds blending into a circle of continuing sounds, to me neither pleasing nor displeasing.

Having little opportunity or capacity for making friends, Thelma welcomed me — unsatisfactory as I must have been — because I was thrust upon her. There was no question of 'making friends' with me — I was merely there.

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When she was very young, her brother, nineteen years older than she was, had been killed. Riding a bicycle along the coast road in one of the violent winter gales, he had been blown into the path of an oncoming car, and died within a few minutes.

Her dead brother, as Thelma knew, was the darling of the family, the one who 'mattered'; she could never greatly matter. Primarily she must keep out of the way.

After Mrs. Dean's husband died, Thelma mattered a little more than formerly. She was 'company', or ought to have been, except that she had almost forgotten how to talk, having kept silent and out of the way so successfully for years.

Occasionally Thelma talked to me, breaking through my flow of selfish chatter, because there was no one else for her to talk to.

After a day spent on the beach with my parents and their friends, bathing and ambling over the rocks, or leaning against a breakwater trying to read, but distracted by the sun, the sea, the sand, and the noisy laughing people, I went back to Mrs. Dean's to wash, to change my frock and my wet sand-sodden canvas shoes, before going home to supper. Later Thelma would call for me at the house, and we went for a walk together before she took me home to her mother's where I spent the night.

Leaving the beach, I allowed myself ten minutes of freedom alone, to bask in my love for the village — a love I preferred not to admit, continually grumbling because we always spent our holidays in the same place.

For me that village will always mean the smells and sounds of summer. One of my favourite smells came

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from the bakery, a cottage not unlike Mrs. Dean's, with similar worn-down steps. The baking was done in an outhouse at the back. The scent of new crisp-cruste'd bread was pleasant enough, but the doughnuts were my especial joy, smelling of essence of doughnuts, filled with warm jam, powdered with sugar. When one last piece remained I ate it slowly, licking my sea-salt fingers, so that grains of sand and sugar and salt blended in the soft warm mouthful. After my last doughnut of the day I always visited the post office which was also a toy shop and newsagent's, and smelled deliciously of paper, string, sealing wax, cardboard boxes, newsprint and india-rubber balls. Often I picked up one of the balls and sniffed at it. No one took any notice; I was just a girl wandering about the village in the summer months who happened to like the smell of india-rubber. Having sniffed my fill I nosed at the comics, half regretting I was no longer enthralled by *Boy's Own*. Then I looked along the shelf of second-hand books (mostly left behind in boarding-houses and sold to the post office for threepence a time, and re-sold by them at a trifling profit.) Sometimes I snatched at a bargain: Stanley Weyman's *Gentleman of France* for sevenpence, Jeffery Farnol's *Broad Highway* for eightpence. If I had spent my 'allowance' I left tuppence deposit and either waited until next week or more likely cajoled the balance from one of my family the next day.

After the post office, the pond, where I watched the ducks troop solemnly to bed — at least they walked towards one of the cottages and were let in by the garden gate, and I always imagined they were going to bed. Stiff-legged, occasionally giving an angry quack, they

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came out of the pond one by one, formed themselves into a not quite straight line, making their slow and ponderous way over the wide footpath, up a short lane, and in by the gate. If I was too late to see them my day was incomplete, and I had to cross each finger of my right hand over the next one, and then the forefinger over the thumb, and keep them like that until I reached Mrs. Dean's — when I had to pull them apart because they had stiffened up.

After supper, when Thelma came to fetch me, we usually took our 'cemetery' walk, up the village street, over the green, standing for a few seconds beneath the rook-encrusted elms, along by the pond, over the bridle path, through the lich-gate, disturbing the bats, along the cupressus-lined pathway of the main route, then off to the right by the narrow stone path to the newer graves. There we sat on some low marbled edging in the warm air of a summer dusk, wondering why the cobbled walls of the graveyard had so many bits of broken glass stuck along the top, and breathing in the scent of freshly turned earth, and thinking of death as a word that poets use. Growing old was so unspeakably horrible; to die young was essential. So I decided (and told Thelma who decided too) that one simply could never fall in love except with someone who had died young. Keats qualified, and so did Shelley; Byron had died just young enough not to be considered old. Ernest Dowson — whom I had just discovered — was perfect: *They are not long the weeping and the laughter, love and desire and hate. . . . And having felt none of them I was so glad they were not long.*

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One evening as we sat side by side nibbling milk chocolate and I had several times declaimed *Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay* and then had paused (*might stop a hole to keep the winds away?*) not being sure, Thelma asked:

‘What would you like most in the world, if you could choose?’

Oh, isn’t that just your sort of soppy question!

Even when I said it, I knew it wasn’t true, not ‘fair’. Thelma, usually withdrawn to the point of being nearly non-existent, seldom asked personal questions.

‘It isn’t my sort of “soppy” question.’ For once she sounded indignant. ‘And even if it was, what’s wrong with that? Haven’t you ever thought I might get tired of not asking soppy questions?’

I realised with a slight sense of shame that unless we were together I did not think of her at all.

‘What would you like?’ she persisted.

I said, vaguely, I would like to ‘do’ things.

Thelma smiled. ‘Perhaps you will.’

I did not know how to deal with this nebulous conversation. Suddenly the churchyard was a grisly place I wanted to escape from. I suggested that we should go back to the pond.

Abstractedly Thelma agreed, and we did not speak again until we were sitting on a wooden bench facing the shallow mud-coloured water. The ducks had gone, only two swans were left.

‘What I want isn’t possible,’ Thelma said.

Feeling a little foolish because I had been slow to comprehend, I asked her what she would choose if the one miraculous choice was hers.

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For a few seconds she hesitated, then in a high self-condemning voice she said:

'I wish I had a different nose.'

Surprised and embarrassed, all I could do was to stare at the heat flies clouding the pond. The larger of the two swans reared itself out of the water and advanced threateningly towards the bank, tossing its head and half opening and then closing its heavy wings, as if shrugging its shoulders preparatory to making an attack upon an inquisitive rough-haired terrier yapping at the water's edge.

I did not hope for a fight, but perhaps I hoped for a semblance of one between the big cross bird and the noisy little dog; I longed for a commotion outside us to break up the strange tension at the end of a hot day. The sky, once high and blue, was purple now, pressing nearer to the earth. Thelma's words were burning in my cheeks and ears. I began to wonder whether she was making fun of me, obliquely, for some reason of her own.

I felt my nose. Suddenly I could not remember exactly what it looked like. Was she trying to tell me how ugly it was?

Thelma noticed my fingers tracing the shape of my nose.

'You's is all right,' she said. 'Mine's too big.'

For the first time I really looked at her nose; it was impossible not to.

'What's wrong with it? I asked. It's quite an ordinary nose.'

'It isn't pretty,' she said, 'it's a man's nose.'

I'm not pretty at all, I reminded her.

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She agreed with disconcerting alacrity. 'That's different. No one will ever say poor you, and they're beginning to say poor me already. 'And now you will, too.'

No, I shan't, I promise.

'I don't know why I'm talking to you like this. You're only a child.'

I said I didn't feel particularly like one.

'That's because you read too much. Mother says it isn't natural.'

'Oh damn your mother!

She gave her little yelp of laughter, half-stifled with one hand over her mouth.

'That's rude.' Suddenly she was prim again.

Saying it to you isn't rude. It would be if I'd said it to your mother, I argued.

'I hope you're not going to become one of those women who "feel bound to say".' Thelma's voice was unexpectedly sharp. 'That's like my mother, and it's insufferable.'

At that moment I felt very young and rather silly, realising that Thelma's words were out of my small world.

Not knowing how to put the evening right between us, impulsively I threw an arm around her thin shoulders. Immediately she drew back.

Afterwards she made her wordless apology by making it easy for us to walk across the green, down the village street, arm in arm; a touch she was accustomed to; a gesture she could accept.

When we said good night she stooped down and touched my cheek with her cheek — the nearest to a kiss she was able to offer.

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Even then I realised that Thelma ought to have been able to laugh more leisurely, instead of in little fits and starts, each small sound shut back in her throat and her expression rearranged. Then there was her hair, lovely in its certainty of colour; a tube of paint could have been named after it: somehow that was wasted, made nothing of.

When she had turned to go into her bedroom, I said:

You needn't worry about your nose, your hair's so wonderful. . .

'Is it?' She stood, looking over her shoulder, not even making what, as I think back, might have been a customary movement of putting one hand up to the soft red mass. 'Mother says it's much too bright and doesn't go with anything.'

When I thought about her in the train I realised she had lived uncherished, and could not even cherish her hair. Perhaps the only cherishing she had had was by proxy, when her brother was alive, and then by being his sister she had some status.

What would she be like now? Friendly? Oh yes, she couldn't not be, could she? Otherwise what would I do? How wretched if she had nearly forgotten me, or, worse, remembered what she disliked and forgotten the rest. I wanted Nell all over again, affectionate and cosy, slapdash and ready for laughter, but Nell had gone, and Thelma would have to do — if I could stand-in for whom-ever Thelma wanted.

I hesitated in the station yard, eyeing the buses warily, then deciding against them. I pretended that I could not

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subject Nicholas to a bus. While waiting for a cab the dog yawned, shook himself thoroughly from his ears to the tip of his tail, lifted his leg against a lamp-post, and looked up at me, his face expressing, I hoped, approval of the holiday we were to have together.

It was a day early in October, a little windy, with a soft blue sky; far away on the horizon over the slightly moving sea, tiny trickles of clouds were blown about. An autumn sun, pale and hardly visible, yet raying across the whole sky, shone all the time. A perfect day for arriving.

Mrs. Dean was much the same as I had remembered her; a pear-shaped face topping a pear-shaped body. The lobes of her ears were long and thick, pulled down by heavy jet ear-rings. Her eyes were watery, her eyelids wrinkled.

She greeted me with her customary kindness and innate indifference, as if we had met the day before. She regarded Nicholas without enthusiasm. Nicholas, a dog accustomed to being petted, jumped up at her making little noises of delight. Firmly she pushed him down.

'I don't mind the dog,' she said. 'But I don't want to keep on knowing it's here. Your old room's ready and by the time you've put your things away and had a wash Thel will be back.'

Dismissing me with a smile, she sat down and resumed her occupation of putting her fingers out of joint and pushing them back again. I listened to the little cracks they made.

I put Nicholas's lead over the old-fashioned latch on the

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staircase door until I had taken my suitcase upstairs and I could come back for him. He was an easy dog to carry; very long-bodied but fairly light in weight, he put his chubby front paws on my shoulder and looked interestedly around, always pleased to have the opportunity of seeing a room from a different height.

Mrs. Dean turned her head and for a few seconds stopped pulling at her finger joints.

'What's the matter with that animal? Can't he walk?'

I said he could walk perfectly well, but I thought the stairs might be too steep for him.

She gave a wheezing laugh.

'Funny sort of dog that's got to be carried about,' she said. 'I'd expect a dog to carry me.'

My bedroom was neat and comfortable. The draped linen curtains, soft from much washing, tied back on each side of the shallow small-paned window, were of the same indefinite design as one of Thelma's summer frocks. The bedspread was pale brown, made of some thin silky material; the rug a slightly darker brown. On the bedside table a flowered Minton teapot with a chipped spout held a cluster of creamy rambler roses. The small garden at the back was walled and sheltered from the winds and the salt spray, and often a few roses were still in bloom on Christmas Day. On the table by the window an oval swing mirror reflected a white glazed jug filled with ferns, thistles, grasses, and one or two branches of a climbing shrub bearing purple berries. I knew Thelma had arranged these because whenever we used to walk over the downland or along the lanes on the outskirts of the village she collected strands of wild flowers

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and grasses, took them home and pushed them carelessly into a bowl, moved them about for a second or two, effortlessly producing a formal pattern.

After I had unpacked my few things, putting Nicholas's small blanket, his rubber bone and his rubber ball with a bell in it on the bed, so that he could sleep as usual at my feet, I took him out with me. I wanted to buy some cigarettes, but most of all I wanted to look at the sea.

At the top of the slipway a street lamp fastened by a bracket to the grey pebbles of the wall had just been lit. The subdued yellow radiance made the early evening sky appear darker by contrast, and beyond the slipway were the humps of sea-worn rocks, green smudges in the twilight, and beyond them the pearl-grey sea rising to slight ridges, dipping to small hollows, frothily sucking at a far-off strip of shell-strewn sand.

Nicholas stood still, his feet pointing outward., his nails clinging to the ridges of uneven pavement and broken-up lumps of disused breakwaters which was the beginning of the 'sea-walk'. This was his first experience of the sea. He stared at it; flapping his ears as if to shake the strange sounds out of them, then he looked up at me, and suddenly slewed round, pulling me back where we had come from.

Tomorrow, I promised him — you'll enjoy it all tomorrow.

The friendly hugger-mugger village shop selling cigarettes, tobacco, bull's-eyes, toffees, evening papers and picture postcards of fat women wearing tight bathing costumes, had become a smart little box with leaded windows showing a selection of expensive cigarette

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lighters and cut-glass ashtrays. The elderly woman who had kept the shop for years and never managed to remember the price of anything had gone. In her place was a lonely seeming young man with a beaky face and over-long fingernails. At first he tried unsuccessfully to make friends with Nicholas, but most dogs are snobs — they will not willingly make friends higher, or lower, or sideways; their particular milieu is the only one.

He offered me a cigarette and I said I would prefer to smoke one of my own, then I offered him one and he said he liked his own brand best.

'Here's to Mr. Chamberlain,' he said, drawing deeply at his cigarette and snorting a lot of smoke down his nostrils. 'If it wasn't for him we wouldn't be here now, would we?'

Where would we be then?

'Wiped out.' He sounded as if he relished the idea. 'Now's the time for us to cut ourselves off from all foreigners and have faith and begin curing people. A friend of mine's been working at it for years and without enough fi-nance *and* with us still spending millions a year on things to kill people.'

I said, how awful, and found my cigarette had gone out.

'And what's more,' he said, leaning across the counter and flicking one of the expensive lighters right in my face, nearly burning my nose, 'he's sitting not ten miles from here with tubes sticking out all over his body — experiments, you understand — and if he doesn't get the fi-nance it'll all be for nothing.'

I wondered whether he was mad, but decided he was more what Laurie used to call Uncle Jones, 'not *mad* mad,

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a bit gaga, on the edge' — and as I seldom feel entirely sane myself it does not do to be surprised at other people.

'It's roots,' he spoke confidentially, 'that's what you've got to be careful of.'

What roots?

'Parsnips, potatoes, carrots, turnips, anything that goes deep down and feeds. My friend says the soil's poisoned. It's all right on top, but get a few inches below and it's just muck.'

When he was beginning to explain in some detail about 'the fermentation of the mould' someone else came in and I was released.

He called after me comfortingly: 'Why should we worry? We've been eating the stuff for years — we've had it.'

Turning towards the cottage, I saw Thelma some yards in front of me on her way home. She held herself well, although perhaps rather stiffly, moving her feet in an almost straight line, her arms close to her sides; tightly pressed under one arm was a thin envelope purse. She gave an impression of being tucked into herself, mechanically set towards her destination, tautened against the possibility of any casual contact with the passersby. She never meandered about as I was apt to do, suddenly deciding to look in a shop window, or to dawdle for no reason at all, then going off at a trot realising it was late.

Just as she was lifting the latch of the front door, I caught up with her. She gave her nervous little shout of laughter and stooped to speak to Nicholas, scratching him gently behind the ears. Nicholas wagged his long pointed tail and nuzzled enthusiastically at her hand.

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Mrs. Dean greeted us both, half rose from her chair, then flopped down again.

'So you've closed the shop, Thel?' Mrs. Dean asked, although she must have known perfectly well that Thelma had closed the shop.

'Yes, that's right.'

'Everything all right, then?'

'Yes, everything's all right,' Thelma answered automatically.

No, it isn't, I said. The soil's poisoned.

'Oh, him,' Mrs. Dean said. 'He's barmy. Trust you to find *him*, though. You always was a one for finding barmy people, wasn't she, Thel?'

Thelma smiled gently at me, and I thanked her for the flowers in my room before going upstairs to take off my coat. Nicholas, exhausted by the excitements of the journey and his first view of the sea, jumped on my bed and immediately went to sleep. I left him there.

Downstairs I found a decanter of ginger wine and three glasses on a fireside table.

'You always did like ginger wine, didn't you?' Mrs. Dean asked.

Oh yes, very much.

I could not recall ever having tasted it.

Mrs. Dean took a woolly shawl from the arm of her chair and draped it over her knees.

'It's all right in the day,' she said. 'But it gets chilly in the evenings. Draught under the door. My sciatica.'

Thelma had a physically brittle quality, as if there was not enough marrow in her bones, and she might easily break. To this was now added a nervous uncertainty,

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and when she poured out the wine her hand trembled a little.

'Where's that dog of yours, Maryann?' Mrs. Dean glanced round suspiciously.

I said he was on my bed — lying on his own blanket, I added hastily.

'Is he all right?'

Yes, quite. He's asleep.

'Not tearing anything to pieces, is he? All right to leave him there?'

Yes, it's all right.

I had caught it too. Everything was all right. I could think of nothing else to say.

We sipped the ginger wine; it was very hot and sweet. Thelma hardly spoke at all, but then Thelma had seldom talked a lot and it had always taken her a long time to begin. Mrs. Dean questioned me indolently about my life in London, and I said it was 'all right'.

Later I went into the kitchen, opened a tin of meat for Nicholas, brought him down, fed him, gave him some fresh water, and took him out for a few minutes before supper.

After Thelma and I had laid the table, we all ate quickly — shepherd's pie followed by tinned pineapple — concentrating on the food.

Only later in the evening, when supper had been cleared away and washed up, did Mrs. Dean's pear-shaped face show any expression of liveliness.

The curtains were drawn against the cool October air. The iron basket grate standing on tall legs was piled with small logs and topped by a sprinkling of pine cones which

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warmed and scented the room. Thelma spread a green-baize cloth over the Pembroke dining-table and we settled down to play cards.*

'I've never taken to the wireless,' Mrs. Dean said. 'It isn't human.'

That first evening when the cards were produced and Mrs. Dean's eyes were brighter and less watery than I had yet seen them and, forgetting her sciatica, she let the shawl slip from her knees to the ground, merely grunting indulgently when Nicholas decided to lie on the shawl — stretched full-length on his back, fat loose-skinned paws in the air, completely relaxed in a perfect dachshund pattern — I was prepared for Snap, Beggar-my-Neighbour, or perhaps a mild session of Whist. I was wrong. Mrs. Dean had a passion for Poker.

'My husband used to be a lovely Poker player,' she said. 'Neyer batted an eyelid. A real Poker face he had, hadn't he, Thel?'

Thelma nodded. 'That's right,' she said, and smiled at me across the table.

'Pennies out,' Mrs. Dean said and waited while we fetched our purses before she began to deal.

'It's not the money, mind,' she explained. 'It's just if I play I like something to show for it.'

No, it wasn't the money. The stakes were so small that one could seldom win or lose more than three ha'pence or tuppence a hand. It was the sense of excitement, the gambler's instinct.

Mrs. Dean had a Poker player's language, baffling yet fascinating. No doubt she had learned this from her husband, but whether or not it was in general use I do not

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know. The repetitive phrases, at first spoken, were later, after the game had taken over the room and swept us into its rhythm, chanted like the refrain of a song. Instead of merely saying 'pass', Mrs. Dean sang out: 'Pass me by on the wayside, pass me by.'

When one of us had bid up (raising the stakes by a ha'penny) and it was Mrs. Dean's turn to pay if she wanted to have a 'look', if her hand was a bad one she sang:

'I just couldn't look at pussy. I just couldn't look a pussy cat in the face.'

When she was 'banker' and dealing the cards she asked: 'Are you smoking?'

It took me quite a while to discover this had nothing to do with cigarettes.

'Checking?' She waited impatiently with one card ready to be given or replaced on the top of the pack.

While gathering up the cards preparatory to dealing again, she reviewed the previous hand.

'Was yours a cold one?'

Yes — no, perhaps not.

I never found out what she meant.

Soon we were all singing unselfconsciously:

, Pass me by, pass me by on the wayside.

I just couldn't look at pussy. I just couldn't look a pussy cat in the face . . .

Even Thelma gave little yelps of laughter without trying to stifle them by putting her hand in front of her mouth.

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By the end of that first evening, when the cards had been replaced in their cases, the green-baize cloth folded and put away in the drawer, the table moved to its day-time place beneath the window, the ashtrays emptied, and Nicholas, yawning and stretching and shaking himself, had been persuaded to get off the shawl, I felt that I had really 'broken through'. I was accepted not merely as a temporary guest, but as a member of the household.

But the next morning Mrs. Dean was wrapped in her customary indolence.

She could seldom be persuaded to express a preference or give an opinion; even concerning trifling household matters entirely within her province Mrs. Dean remained an unsullied blank.

'What about fish tonight, Mother? Shall I order some on my way?'

Mrs. Dean moved uneasily in her chair and sighed as if cornered.

Patiently Thelma repeated the question.

'Does Maryann like it?' Mrs. Dean glanced in my direction.

Thelma nodded.

'That's all right then,' Mrs. Dean said. 'I don't mind.'

When Mrs. Dean had left us, panting her way upstairs, and Thelma and I were washing up the breakfast things, Thelma said: 'The worst of it is I don't mind either.'

Oh, please please mind, I said. Don't just stand here wiping up cups and saucers. There's only one life . . .

'You just try minding,' Thelma said, 'and see where it gets you.'

It was left to me to order the fish.

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Mrs. Dean cooked it, and we all ate without comment.

Any fish; freshly caught, alive that very morning, just tasted like fish. Mrs. Dean boiled it rapidly, and served it plain with all its bones attached.

When Thelma left that morning to open the shop, Mrs. Dean surprised me by saying she was glad I was there.

'Perhaps you can talk some sense into Thel,' she said. 'She's been working herself up again.'

'What about?

'A man,' she said laconically.

What man? "

'Someone who wants to marry her. And why not? She's over thirty. She'd better hurry up.'

Who is he?

'Leonard's all right, nothing wrong with him. He's got a gentlemen's outfitters up North and comes here for his holidays. Been three years running now.'

Well, if he wants to marry her—— I began.

'She's refused two or three times. I don't understand. Why can't she behave more ordinary? She's too particular. It isn't easy finding anybody. She'll have to make up her mind. He won't wait for ever.'

It sounds as if she has made up her mind, I said.

'She can't afford to when there's no one else in the offing — that's why she gets all these moods. I wish you'd have a word with her, find out what she wants — you know.'

How can I unless she talks to me first?

'She will when she's got used to you being here. Do her good to talk, anyway. She gets all bottled up. I

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don't know what ideas she's got — perhaps she's waiting for the Prince of Wales.'

When Thelma returned that evening Mrs. Dean and I were already drinking sherry which I had bought from the grocer around the corner. Mrs. Dean had agreed to 'try a glass', admitting she found the ginger wine 'a bit heating'.

Thelma looked from one to the other of us.

'You all right, Thel?'

'Yes, I'm all right, the shop's all right, everything's all right.' Thelma spoke sharply.

'No need to snap.'

'I'm sorry,' Thelma said. 'I'm tired.'

She left us for a few minutes. We did not speak.

When Thelma returned she accepted a glass of sherry.

'Been busy, then?' Mrs. Dean asked.

'Practically no one came near the place all day.'

'I thought you said you was tired?'

'So I am tired. If I'd been busy I wouldn't be tired.'

Mrs. Dean sighed and began to grumble softly about no one caring any longer because she was old.

'Now, mother, don't upset yourself. It's so silly. You know I never mean to hurt you.' Thelma was trying, speaking softly and kindly, but the shade of strain showed in her face, especially beneath her eyes where the pale flesh was slightly creased and puffy.

Mrs. Dean gave a sickly martyred smile.

I poured out some more sherry.

Raising her glass as a small gesture of thanks in my direction, Thelma asked with purposeful good humour, 'Has mother been telling you all about Leonard?'

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'I only said he's all right,' Mrs. Dean interrupted, cracking her fingers frantically.

'Not for me.' Thelma was determined. 'He was always trying to maul me about.'

'If you'd made up your mind to marry him he wouldn't have mauled you about, as you put it. He'd have got all he wanted proper, at the proper time.'

'I told him I wouldn't marry him, and I won't marry him. He makes me crawl.'

'What do you mean, *crawl*?'

'Makes my flesh creep if you like that better.' Impatience and sherry — and perhaps my presence — encouraged Thelma to speak firmly.

'You needn't shout. You've got to put up with something like we all have. If a man provides a decent home and pays the bills he's got a right to expect something in exchange.'

'Leonard doesn't provide a decent home and pay the bills so he hasn't any rights. Besides I've got the shop. Don't forget that. He's always had his eye on it.'

'You're not much good in the shop,' Mrs. Dean said. 'And Leonard would make a go of it. You wouldn't be much catch without the shop, would you? Cold as a brass door knob in bed, that's what you'd be.'

'And I'm cold as a brass door knob out of bed, and what of it?' Thelma's voice rose.

'You'll find out what of it soon enough! Any man would look for a little warmth, not someone half dead like you seem to be.'

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Trying to soothe and quieten them, I said I thought Thelma wanted someone quite different, and certainly not Leonard.

'If only you'd seen him,' Thelma said, 'and his awful teeth all black in the front!'

'Don't be so foolish, Thel,' Mrs. Dean spoke as if to a child, 'bringing up a little thing like that. He could have his teeth out, couldn't he?'

'If he had all his teeth out and gold ones set with pearls put in,' Thelma said wildly, 'I still wouldn't marry him. I want someone different.'

'Go on, then. Find someone different. What's stopping you?'

'You've always made me feel no one would ever look at me if it wasn't for the shop,' Thelma said bitterly. 'And now you say I'm half-dead, then you tell me to go and find someone.'

'I'm only trying to make you get a move on,' Mrs. Dean said. 'There isn't all the time in the world at your age, so it's no good pretending there is. When you're over thirty there's always the change of life to consider——'

'Oh, for pity's sake, mother! Change of life! What nonsense you talk! I needn't think about that for another twenty years most likely.'

'Ah, you won't know 'til it's on you how you're going to take it. You began early. Begin early, end early, so they say. Now I couldn't have been more than thirty-five——'

'And you had hot flushes, cold flushes and palpitations and you always felt faint,' Thelma said.

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'I'm only warning you,' Mrs. Dean said. 'Leonard's still willing and you're not getting any younger.'

'Yes, I know, you went to a lot of trouble to arrange it all, and it didn't come off — so let that be a lesson to you.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Yes, you do, perfectly well.'

Mrs. Dean mopped her watery eyes. 'He was a friend of your Aunt Mabel's in Scunthorpe and she suggested he might stay here instead of going to a boarding house.'

'And why did she suggest it? Because you must have talked it over between you and decided, however horrible he was, he'd "do" for me. You never let that room except now and again to friends.'

'You're getting very hard, Thel, you are really. I do everything for the best and you go on like this. It strikes me you can't bear any man near you, and that's not natural and you can't tell me it is.'

Mrs. Dean made a great deal of difficulty about getting up, muttering about her sciatica and how sad it was to get old, then she went off to prepare supper, insisting that she would rather do it by herself.

'Oh, let her alone!' Thelma said. 'She just wants us to sit here and worry about her, and I'm not going to. She isn't as old as all that anyway. She enjoys tottering around telling herself no one lifts a finger and she's on the edge of the grave. All this being so old business is to make *me* feel old.'

I said I thought Thelma took her mother too seriously.

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'I've had so much advice. All I want is to pay everyone out — to pay *you* out, too.'

Why, what have I done? You can't pretend I ever gave you any advice.

'No, but you've always seemed so sure of yourself, even when you weren't much more than a child.'

I've never been sure of myself, and I'm not now.

'It is something to do with you. Don't you remember what we talked about?'

Life and death and religion and face creams, I said.

'And you kept on lending me books of poems, then you'd go away and I'd lie awake at night reading and thinking and whispering the words to myself.'

You can't blame me for that, can you?

'But you'd go *away* . . . and I'd stay here, and I'm still here, stuck in this wretched village, and I'll never get out of it now.' What's Shelley got to do with me or anyone I'm ever likely to meet? Who would I find to give me a guitar and say *take, oh take this slave of music for the sake of him who is the slave of thee?*

I said I'd never found anyone to do that, either.

'Perhaps you haven't, but you haven't had anyone like Leonard found for you, have you? He kept on saying he liked conversation. Conversation! A nice new line in woolly combs — that was his idea of conversation. It wasn't the combs I minded, but money, always money — how much he'd made on this line, how much he expected to make on that, and he was so mean he'd never even take me out for a meal in the evenings. If we went to the pictures it was too early to eat first, too late afterwards. So we'd have high tea here before we went, and then

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we'd come back because he didn't want to miss his dripping sandwich! We had beef every weekend because Leonard must have his dripping sandwiches. Mother used to skedaddle off, tactfully, and what Leonard really looked forward to was a dripping sandwich in one hand and to paw me with the other. How would you like that?

Not very much — in fact not at all.

'I can't even make myself into anyone different. I've been what I am for too long.'

At that moment Mrs. Dean opened the kitchen door and told us supper was nearly ready.

'I see you had the soles skinned on both sides, Thel,' she said: 'Giving old Mr. Grass a lot of trouble, aren't you? He's nearly ninety and on his feet from morning 'til night in that draughty shop.'

'He didn't object — anyway it's his job.'

'His hands are swollen twice the size with chilblains. I always have the underneath skin left on. Keeps the flavour in.'

'Very well, mother.'

'And let me tell you you're very high and mighty about Leonard, but that shop's gone to pot since you've had the running of it. And there won't be much coming into this house without my annuity. What's going to happen to you when I'm gone? You can't expect me to live for ever, can you?'

While Mrs. Dean closed the door very slowly and softly behind her, Thelma whispered — but the words were clear — 'And I don't want you to live for ever.'

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I poured us out some more sherry, and I noticed my hand wasn't very steady either. We drank it quickly.

We ate our supper practically in silence. Afterwards Mrs. Dean said she felt done in and thought she'd have an early night. We did not try to persuade her otherwise.

Thelma refused to come out for a walk when I took Nicholas, and I was glad to be by myself.

The sea was still and cold; the undercliff walk was lonely, the village street practically deserted. My memories of the village were those of midsummer; little groups of visitors strolling about, the sounds of talk and laughter. Nicholas whimpered and shivered. Within twenty minutes I was back.

'I didn't think you'd be long,' Thelma said. She was sitting in her mother's chair, doing nothing, as if she often sat like that.

'Talk to me,' she said.

I told her about my flat, a little about Laurie, and Mr. Flask and Mrs. Walk and Pomkin, more about Nell and Alfred.

'Are you still writing?' Thelma asked,
I nodded.

'Have you had anything published yet?'

No, not yet.

'You'd better hurry up, hadn't you?' Otherwise you'll never get started.'

I was hurt by this, although I tried to remind myself that Thelma was only scratching me a little because of the earlier wounds she had had inflicted by her mother.

'Have you ever——?' she began, then blushed.

Ever what?

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'I mean I know there's Laurie, but you don't seem to have seen him for ages and he used to come and spend holidays down here, didn't he? — almost part of the family — and Alfred sounds nice, but not as if he counted much . . . but has there ever really been somebody . . . and have you ever——?' She mumbled a few words I could not hear.

Perhaps because she had hurt me, I retaliated.

Only once, I said, hoping she would not ask for further details, catching me out in a lie.

She looked shocked and curious — the curiosity won.

'Was it wonderful?' She spoke urgently, leaning forward in her chair, but not looking at me.

Not specially.

'Was it awful, then? Did you hate it?'

It wasn't either, I said. It just didn't happen to mean much to me — but I expect it will later, with someone different.

'I simply can't believe it didn't mean much,' she said. 'I thought it was always terribly important to women, especially the first time.'

Well, it isn't.

'I know men don't care so much, but I always thought women——'

What's the good of your going on saying 'you always thought women'? Whatever you thought it just isn't true.

'But that's frightfully sad, somehow, isn't it?' A condemning expression altered her face, making her resemble her mother.

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I almost wished I had not begun the game, but it was too late to turn back now; besides I had accepted my own make-believe; I felt experienced, rather worldly. I noticed Thelma's nose. It certainly was large, and I felt sorry for her because she probably sensed I was looking at her nose.

I expect it would have been sad for you, I said in a gentler, less impatient voice.

'Perhaps I'll never never have a chance to find out.' She sounded both tearful and enraged.

Suddenly she jumped up and asked me whether I would lock the front door and switch out the lights, and I heard her scurrying up the stairs.

Later in the week Thelma decided to shut the shop for a whole day, and asked me to go into Seaton with her. Mrs. Dean offered to look after Nicholas; I took him for a walk early in the morning, left his food prepared, and as a special treat to comfort him for my absence a saucer of sweetened milk stood by his bowl of water in the kitchen.

When I was on the point of departure I spoke to Nicholas, explaining that I 'would not be long'; a phrase he had learned to trust, and I spread his small blanket on the sofa in the sitting-room where he could doze or look out of the window. I took his pointed face between my hands and stroked his ears back, lightly kissed the top of his long nose, and left him to his vigil.

'You're fair mazed about that dog,' Mrs. Dean said. 'Oh well, it's men or dogs for most women, and if you can afford to stick to dogs I'm not saying it isn't for the best.'

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I said I thought I would prefer both. Mrs. Dean merely grunted.

That day, when there were just the two of us together, was the first time I had watched Thelma's romantic longings loosed, rushing about untethered, searching frantically for a home to nest in. I did not find it pitiful, perhaps because I had not learned how to feel pity, but it was uncomfortable.

She was a woman hovering on the edge of pavements, loitering in front of shop windows, sitting in cafés stirring cups of cooling coffee, waiting to be claimed. She neither invited nor repulsed, she was merely there ready for the expected footsteps, the looked-for face, the outstretched hand, ready for someone who never arrived, or who perhaps did not exist. She walked with a figure out of a dream beside her, and beyond the dreamlike figure I walked, and she spoke to me from a distance across the invisible companion.

Now and again she tried to force the pace, to make some sudden senseless move, in case the man she was determined to meet was closeted inside one of the poky little shops, and she might miss him for years, even lose him for ever, for the sake of a moment's delay, a corner not turned swiftly enough, or a careless pause when she looked towards the sea and she ought already to have been in the next alley stalking her prey. I followed her into antique shops where, with a disconcerting mingling of cringing and haughtiness, she asked the price of silver spoons, blue glass bowls, papier mâché ink stands, Battersea enamel pintrays, while she stared frantically around for what she really wanted, and what was not there.

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She made one or two purchases, but only if the man who served her was prepossessing enough, or if he regarded her with some flicker of interest. She bought a small lustre jug, heliotrope flowers on a white ground, with the words *Be Happy* in scrolled silver lettering. The man who sold it to her was tall, dark-haired with a once-handsome bashed-in face and inquisitive eyes. I felt that he resented my presence, realising perhaps that if I had not been there he might have managed to sell a lot of other things, less pretty and more expensive. •

Thelma backed out of the shop, clutching the tissue-wrapped jug in her arms, then seeing that the man had already turned away, she thrust the jug towards me, and I took it from her without a word. Cracked by age and ill-use it was still a graceful thing, and I felt it needed a temporary protector in case Thelma dropped it.

'I don't know why I got it,' she spoke frantically. 'I don't want it. I don't know what made me . . .'

I said I would very much like to buy it from her, if she would allow me to do so. I meant this. Suddenly I coveted the china scrap, with its once bright lustre thin in places and the silver words just visible.

'No, I won't sell it. Definitely not. I'll give it to you, though. Beg you to take it. Please, please keep it.'

Uncertain whether or not I ought to have insisted on returning it, I kept the jug, glad to have it, but always uneasy because of the sadness of the moment when it became mine.

Before going to bed that night I picked it up and held it between my hands until the smooth chilled surface drew the warmth from my palms, and I read the wording

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on it again and again, remembering Thelma's pale bewildered face, and I wondered why she, of all the people in the world, had to care so desperately for this myth of 'happiness', and had never, as far as I knew, come near to finding it.

When we entered the cottage Mrs. Dean was sitting where we had left her — although I suppose she must have moved in the meantime — sitting and smiling and telling me that Nicholas, considering he was a dog, had been good as gold, and cracking her fingers.

Suddenly I could feel all the pain of those joints being pulled out and pushed back again, and the pain became part of Thelma's rushing about and never finding anyone, and I said:

Oh, don't do that! It must hurt so much.

'Don't do what?' Mrs. Dean looked surprised. 'I'm not doing anything. Just sitting here and having a quiet think.'

At the end of the week I was ready to return to London. Each night I had slept well and long; I felt rested, but not revived.

I knew I was leaving Thelma as wretched as when I came. I had been unable to give her one word of help or hope. And what I had told her was untrue: not that it mattered, because I do not believe that sexual satisfaction was what, above all else, she longed for; she thought of love, perfect love, as a chilly circumspect pinnacle of romance, as beautiful and meaningless as a church steeple to an unbeliever.

Thelma said goodbye to me with the remembrance of

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an affection she had once felt, but without much present care. I think she was more sorry to lose Nicholas; she knelt in front of him encircling his narrow head in her thin hands, speaking to him in the soft undertones he appreciated, and while listening he wagged his tail round and round, an endearing way he had when he was particularly pleased.

Mrs. Dean was amiable but remote as ever. She said she looked forward to seeing me again soon, and I replied that I looked forward to my return, and then she looked away and began to crack her fingers, entirely closed up in herself, or in some former life that I knew nothing of.

Chapter Seven

WITHOUT Nell and Alfred nothing was the same. Their flat was let to a middle-aged couple, a Mr. and Mrs. Campden, who produced an atmosphere of being ill-used.

Mrs. Campden, a small agitated woman, was much concerned with the state of the entrance hall, and intent upon establishing a rota for the cleaning of the front steps.

Their presence was unsympathetic and comfortless. They were against the Roman Catholic Church, dogs, cats, birds, dirt, motor cars, and inherited wealth.

They believed (with reservations) in vegetarianism, Joanna Southcott's box, soap and water, The Book of the Dead, and a society called The Seventeen Stars.

The house became very noisy in the worst possible way. Mrs. Campden, fighting a clattering battle against germs, washed up with a great deal of commotion and many rinsing waters.

They subscribed to weekly papers I had never heard of: *Strike*, *Edge*, or *Shoot*, describing the iniquities of the Monarchy, the Government, the Bank of England, and the Stock Exchange.

One morning Mrs. Campden asked me down for a cup

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of coffee, and as it was evident that I was doing nothing I could not pretend I was 'busy'.

The sitting-room was very clean and empty and I watched the smoke from my cigarette blackening and polluting the atmosphere.

Everything was horribly changed: no sense of drolling ease, no pieces of Nell's needlework, bright and pretty and seldom finished; a tasteless austerity of beige and biscuit seeped over carpet, walls, paintwork and furniture. The chairs and tables were geometrically arranged, perfectly in order. The fireplace was stuffed up with a fan of green pleated paper. The untidy straggling geraniums in flower pots of assorted sizes had gone from the window sill. The room felt serious as if no one had even smiled in it for a long time.

We found it difficult to talk to each other, and I had reached a stage of desperation of whispering to myself *my name is Ozymandias, King of Kings, my name is Ozymandias, King of Kings . . .* and began to wonder whether I was going mad, before I found out why I had been invited. Mrs. Campden was campaigning against the people on the floor above me who continued to shout at each other, particularly in the mornings, and she wanted to enlist my support.

'All that bawling and screeching,' she said, stirring her coffee rapidly until the skin of the milk wrapped itself around the handle of the spoon, 'it's got to be put a stop to. I don't know how you stand it. You'll have to complain.'

I said they didn't disturb me, so I hadn't anything to complain about.

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'It's a question of duty.' She looked intently at me. 'What's the good of me and my husband complaining if you don't?'

Yes, what indeed?

I liked saying that; it cheered me up.

'Don't you want to pull together?' she asked.

I quite enjoy listening to them, I said. It breaks up the morning.

Mrs. Campden looked stunned, but recovered quickly and said she was sure I'd feel differently when I had thought it over, then rapidly began an attack on the laurel hedge bordering the gritty passage leading from the garden — a small enclosure of sooty mould and fast-dying shrubs. This hedge, a collection of dried twigs sparsely covered with large wilting leaves, suddenly became precious to me.

'It's so unhygienic,' she said, 'nothing but a dust trap, and it all blows in our kitchen window.'

When I managed to escape I decided I must get away from that depressing house as soon as possible. I kept on meeting Mrs. Campden in the entrance hall; often, yawning and unwashed, I had just crept down to fetch my newspaper, and she, all tense and pinched up and half-running, would be coming back from shopping. One morning I got up at a reasonable time, dusted my sitting-room, went out and bought a bunch of daffodils and a bottle of cheap sherry and asked Mrs. Campden if she would like to come up and have a drink.

She arrived exactly at midday and sat uneasily on the edge of a chair and said: 'My, what a lot of books.'

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She might have added and what a few shelves because most of the books were piled on the floor.

When I handed her a glass of sherry, which she somewhat dubiously accepted, I noticed that, in spite of the gloves she wore during her interminable sessions of cleaning and dusting and washing up, her fingers were pink and puckered as if the goodness had been soaked out of the flesh.

She drank in nervous little sips and said she didn't know what we were both doing just sitting drinking sherry when everything was so awful and the end of the world might come at any minute.

Why should the end of the world come at any minute?

'I always see you *fetching* newspapers. Don't you *read* them?'

Yes, but not very intelligently.

She screwed up her prematurely wizened little face either in misery or exasperation and gave me a *précis* of the international situation.

'Aren't you untidy,' she said. 'I don't know how you can find anything.'

I can't.

'If we've got to fight we'll all be in it, and that means you and me, too. I can't bear it . . . You'll never be able to find anything. Never.'

I suppose it won't matter then if I can or not.

'I wish you'd let me help you to get tidied up — just in case.'

I told her I was moving anyway.

Until that second I had only thought about it as a possibility. By saying the words I had created a reality.

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'When?'

In a week or two.

'Where are you going?'

I'm not sure yet.

Soon after that she left, running down the stairs to escape from the untidiness of my rooms and the muddle of my mind, and when she had gone I felt an old familiar long-lost excitement in my throat, and I danced a few steps of the Charleston of my childhood all by myself in the kitchen, and looked at my flushed cheeks in the mirror behind the door, and knew I was happy, and decided to forget about war. War meant the last one, over and done with for ever. War was then, not now.

A few weeks later Mrs. Campden was taken by ambulance to the country for 'a rest'. The possibility of war had wounded her months before war was declared.

Continuing to type film scripts and to write short stories that were never published, I began to look for somewhere else to live.

I was given permission to sub-let my present apartment, providing my tenant was 'respectable and approved'. The responsibility for the rent was still mine.

In reply to my card in the window of the local news-agent, Emanuel called.

Tall, his arms disproportionately long, a closed-in sulky expression pulling his face awry, dressed in flannel slacks and an imitation suede jacket, with a thick woollen scarf wound several times around his neck, a careless shambling walk, he had no immediate attraction: worse than that, he looked neither respectable nor approved.

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About my own age, already he seemed old in resentment. He was poor and hated being poor. Not that he wanted money; all he wanted was to be left alone, and because other people had money they had authority over him and would not leave him alone. It was wrong for anyone to have more money than was essential for existence.

He lolloped uneasily around the two draughty rooms, glared at my hideous shot-silk eiderdown as if it was a symbol of luxurious living, breathed heavily over the shabby bathroom, the bath patchy and peeling, shrugged his shoulders at the small cluttered kitchen, and asked off-handedly how many people lived in the apartment.

Only one. Just me.

He became more contemptuous, and asked offensively how much rent I was asking.

I told him.

Abruptly he said it was more than he could afford, swung round, and began to amble away.

He had no idea of 'bargaining' or 'coming to terms'. If he could pay, he paid: if not he went elsewhere.

No, wait! I called after him. How much can you afford?

The sum he mentioned was two shillings and sixpence a week less than I had asked.

I told him he could have the flat for that amount, if the rooms suited him.

'Why?' Immediately he was suspicious.

Because I've never let a flat before, and I don't like doing it, and I want to get it over.

'All right. I'll take it.'

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Not one gentle word; not even a smile. He had told me exactly what he could pay. I had accepted. No reason for gratitude.

He wrote down his surname and address (a students' hostel) on a torn page of a crumpled exercise book he carried folded in half in his jacket pocket.

'I'm studying to be an architect and I can't work there,' he explained briefly. 'The walls are not thick enough and many gramophones are played.'

• He gave me ten shillings.

'To prove I shall come back,' he said gravely, looking at me for the first time, and when he looked it was not so much for interest, but rather as if he did so once and for all, and would never need to waste his time again. He shambled off, thumping down the stairs, slamming the front door behind him, and I listened to his feet kicking and punishing the pavement as he walked away, until I could hear them no longer.

I went into the kitchen, lit the oven, leaving the door of the cooker open, and pulled my chair near the warmth. I felt chilled with a peculiar shiver of anticipation.

We had discussed nothing. I did not even know when he expected to move in. I would have to write to him, although I sensed that any letter, however necessary, might be an irritant. I could imagine him saying he could not work because there were many letter-boxes and letters were delivered.

A bubble of amusement near to hysteria swelled in my throat and was released in a gasp of laughter.

My hands were cold, and I noticed my fingernails, short and unvarnished. Now that Emanuel had looked

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at me I must find out what I looked like. I went into the bedroom and opened the cupboard door; inside was a mirror left by the previous tenant — the only full-length mirror I had.

I tried to pretend I had never seen myself before; a young woman not much over five feet tall, passably slim, wearing a brown skirt and a brown pullover; hair of lighter brown; my face pale, unpowdered, large eyes of no definite colour, greenish, greyish, unnoticeable. I turned round, lifted my skirt and stared at my legs. There was nothing particular about them, either; they were just legs.* One stocking was laddered. My shoes were flat, heelless, dull.

Rushing to the dressing table I opened a pot of face cream. Oh no, wash first, wash first. But where? Damn not having a washbasin! In the kitchen? No, too sordid; over the bath. I pinned back my hair, then I soaped my face, neck, and ears most carefully, massaging the soap in with my fingers and the palms of my hands, rinsed it off, once, twice and then a third time. Dry carefully, thoroughly. Cream my hands, and look at them as if they were not mine; slim, supple, square with blunt finger tips, not bad, but not elegant, either: not the kind of hands I would have chosen, too restless, and unable to arrange themselves in soft patterns. They lacked — what did they lack? Repose. Repose? No, that had a mossy squashed-down sound. They were just potentially useful hands, left idle.

Now for my face.

I returned to the dressing table, dipping my fingers in the pot of cream, spreading some lightly over my cheeks;

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a little, not too much, otherwise it will all get sticky. Upwards, smooth upwards; yes, that's it. Now powder, and not too much of that, either. No, not that filthy puff — a piece of cotton wool. Eyebrow pencil? Yes, of course — except I hadn't one. Mascara? Only the top lashes; and for heaven's sake wash the brush first, and use water, don't spit on it. Eye shadow? Not in the daytime, and anyway there isn't any. Lipstick, not too bright, not too thick.

• Now what next? Brush my hair — but why hadn't I thought of that before? Shall I pin it on top? Shall I be distinguished? Yes, yes, let me be that. Now pull a few strands over the too high forehead. That's better.

Oh why couldn't I have the last hour over again? Why couldn't I put it on like a record? Not play it back as it had happened, but as it might have happened if I had done all this to myself before Emanuel arriv'd — and if I could have thought of something to say, too: that might have been a help.

Emanuel: even now I am inclined to shy away from the name.

One might say he came from Illyria to give an idea of the quality of foreignness he had for me, not immediately identifiable as belonging to any particular country — alien, that is, to my small piece of country and the people in it.

It is difficult even now to arrange my memories in order. I saw him perhaps a week later, and he asked me to let him know when I had found another flat and when he could move in.

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'There's no hurry,' he said. 'You can write to me if you like.'

When, that meeting, or the next, he asked me my name he repeated 'Marianne' as if it was not unexpected.

'And mine is Emanuel,' he said, throwing the word at me. 'I'm not a Jew.'

Who cares? I asked. Who cares whether you are or not?

'In case you're interested,' he said. 'Just in case — I'm not.'

His eyes were dark, his hair a sombre brown, near to black after he had plastered it down with a cheap cream bought from one of the chain stores. This white gluey substance has an unmistakable smell; scenting pillow-slips and the backs of chairs, hanging around a room for days after the wearer has departed. I can still recognize this mixture of oils and synthetic essence of violets, and I sniff the air with a mingling of irritation and disturbance.

At first I was uneasy shut in any room with him, wanting him to stay for ever and at the same time longing for him to go away immediately. I felt we had everything in the world to talk about, and somehow there were no words to use.

Often I opened wide the window to let the cold air in, so that part of me could escape. And yet nothing had happened; we had merely met and talked a little and we knew each other's names.

Although I hardly realised what was happening to me, the utter degradation — as it then seemed — of being caught up in a violence of feeling I was unprepared for

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gave me an occasional understanding of other people. Illogical and unable to analyse my own reactions, I began to notice other people's. I listened more carefully and tried to think beyond myself. The process was slow and seldom successful, but the will was there.

Although my personal life was still as muddled as one of my dressing-table drawers — a chaos of neglect with occasional streaks of brightness, where silk scarves, handkerchiefs, bracelets, ear-rings and gloves were heaped one upon another — the world outside was gradually taking shape. I began to tell myself that this time must be lived through and, if possible, made use of.

What should I do next? I picked things up and tried to concentrate upon putting them away or packing them in suitcases — but where could I put them? And in which suitcase?

I looked at lots of flats and rooms and apartments and bought myself one or two close-fitting, rich-coloured hats, but none of my clothes was the kind hats could be worn with, so I threw them on the bed and tried to forget that they were there. A very young, still wobbling, black and white kitten, recently acquired by the shouting couple on the floor above, occasionally visited me, and eventually nestled down in one of the hats. This meant that the hat was not a waste of money but a positive necessity. Without it where would the kitten have snoozed and purred and licked his paws and cleaned his whiskers?

I bought a new powder box with a mirror in the lid and carried it around in my purse and often stared at my face, and wished my eyes were blue or green or brown

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and did not change from hour to hour and room to room.

Above all I wished I was beautiful and tall and clever and then I could have snatched at Emanuel, and perhaps kept him in a cage, and cherished him for always.

I do not think that even in my dreams I pretended that Emanuel might cherish me.

The slightest blemish distressed me; a small scratch given in play by the kitten's tiny claws I saw as a disfiguring wound swelling my cheek. I bought a tube of theatrical cream guaranteed to hide scars, and used this with such enthusiasm that my face became an off-white mask, darkening at the edges of my nose where the sticky mass collected in brownish streaks. No, that would not do. Enraged, I threw the cream away instead of adding it to the general litter of my bedroom — the first definite move I had made for days.

I longed for someone to talk to. Often I woke in the night and knew Laurie had been part of the crowded confusion of a dream already sliding off the surface of my conscious mind. Sometimes he did not appear in my dream but I sensed he was near, beyond the next break-water, slithering over the chalky green-weeded rocks curving out of the sands, a shrimping net in one hand, a bucket in the other, leaping across the small rock pools. I had no desire to run after him, to call out or to wave; when the shrimping was over I knew he would turn back, jumping from one rounded rock to another, until he reached the newly washed multicoloured pebbles, and came towards me to show me his catch — five or six

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shrimps, perhaps one minute inedible crab he released on the edge of the sands, letting it scuttle off, while we watched, sharing its pleasure at being free.

But before Laurie came back, I always woke, and so when one day I saw him walking in front of me towards the Heath, I did not intend to lose him in reality, and I ran, running not only after Laurie, but mostly after the prancing boy of thirteen years ago, and the sound of the sea, and summer, and being young, and not knowing Emanuel.

The day altered, the scentless gorse had a smell of childhood and of home as soon as Laurie took my arm and suited his steps to keep in time with mine.

We always met easily, Laurie and I, without any need for explanations as to why we had temporarily misled each other.

As we walked, sometimes arm in arm, sometimes hand in hand, he told me that he had discovered, at first to his distress, later to his relief, that he had a talent for painting streets and houses, churches, tumbledown corners of the city, turning them into pretty scenes. A mid-Victorian terrace of smoke-grimed houses became a nostalgic winter scene, with leafless trees, a hover of birds and the first snowflakes falling. A grey street, noisy with vans, lorries and motorcars, became a misty evocation of a spring afternoon with a flower barrow nearly hidden beneath mounds of pale purple tulips and white narcissi, and in the distance a road soft as if painted with feathers ended with a light grey church spire needling against a pale sky.

For his pleasure he made compositions of pieces of

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newsprint, scraps of material, grained surfaces of wood sliced as thinly as bread and butter, powdered glass beads and whirls of tinsel, stuck on boards in overlapping circles, triangles and half-moons.

Do you sell the others? I asked.

He said, yes, he did. Not for a great deal, but he did sell them.

'There's a gallery south of the river,' he said, 'and they buy whatever I paint.'

And apart from painting? I asked.

'I'm living with Ellen,' he said. 'But I thought you knew.'

How could I know? You've never told me.

'I've often told you to myself, when you weren't there. Besides I didn't want to tell anyone, not even you, really. I've had such a sort of tottering on the brink feeling — suspended between nothing and nothing.'

Is it still like that?

'A little — but I'm getting used to it. There's so much I hate but breaking away would be worse. I shall always be a prisoner. If I wasn't a prisoner here I'd be one there. Either you're the captive type, or you aren't. I take after my father. I've got the same sort of void inside, but I haven't got Hannibal to fill it. So I found Ellen instead — or she found me.'

What's so wonderful about Ellen, whoever she is, if there's so much you hate? I asked.

'Whatever I hate, it would be worse without her,' he said. 'She can't leave people alone, she's taken my life and ...'

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And what?

'She's just taken my life, and given me something — God knows what.'

She sounds terrible, I said.

'Of course she's not terrible. She just *is*. Ellen. Inevitable. You'll see when you meet her. Would you like to?'

Yes, please.

'And you? Something's happened, hasn't it?'

Only in my mind, I said.

'Would you like to tell me?'

Not yet. Just in case . . .

'What's his name?'

Emanuel.

'What's he like?'

I don't know yet. Awful, I expect.

'So's Ellen, really — awful but necessary.'

A sudden memory of childhood made me cross my fingers, in case Emanuel became necessary — a never-ending obsession. Until now I had tried to pretend that it would be possible to end what had not properly begun.

Laurie felt my involuntary movement.

'What's that for?'

I told him.

'Now you'll have to keep your fingers crossed until you see a black and white dog.'

You've got it wrong, I said. I forget exactly what it is, but you've got it wrong.

'Emanuel . . . He doesn't sound real, does he? Emanuel . . .'

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He is very real. As himself. But what I feel may be for someone I've made up.

'You'll go on making people up, pet, one after another. For ever and ever.'

Why?

'Because when you need someone he won't be there, so whoever is there has to stand in. It's different for me; I don't have to make people up. Ellen's just taken over — that's what I need, I suppose.'

Even if Ellen has taken over, you've still got something of your own — your painting.

'You are a silly! Ellen runs the gallery that shows my paintings. *She* sells them. No one else could. There's no escape. That's Ellen. Formidable.'

Are you going to marry her?

He shook his head. 'She's married,' he said.

Divorce? Not possible?

'She wouldn't consider it. He's part of her life — and part of mine, too. That's why the situation's frightening sometimes. I suppose I ought to find it intolerable, but I don't.'

If Ellen is necessary, then you've got to tolerate the situation.

'There was a time when I could have got away. Now I can't. And honestly I don't see why I should want to, unless one has moral standards, and I haven't. It's odd, though, to know nothing's mine. I haven't even got an address, only a room in someone else's flat.'

You've just said you're the captive type.

'It's worse than that, I'm not even chained up. Ellen keeps saying I ought to get away. She's not difficult or

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jealous or demanding. All the doors and windows are open, and no questions asked — and I can't go.'

'What will happen, then?'

'Nothing, I expect. We'll just continue as we are. Until one of us dies——'

Until her husband dies? Is that what you're waiting for?

'No, it isn't. I'd miss him. I can't imagine Ellen without him, either. She'd go to pieces. Sometimes she has fits of crying — not ordinary crying, she doesn't ever make a noise — or she just sits and stares, and when she's like that Gussie's the only one who can do anything with her. He always tells me to go away and leave her alone. He says she's crying out her guilt, or something — that's all rather odd, although it doesn't often happen. I suppose he *will* die first — he's older than Ellen, and she's older than I am.'

A lot older?

He nodded. 'Fifteen years, perhaps. I'm not sure — besides it doesn't matter.'

But what will you do if everything breaks up? You've no life of your own.

'Neither have they, without me — not now.' He spoke factually, not boastfully. 'They haven't any children or cats or dogs or canaries, and not many friends, hardly any, really. So they've more or less adopted me.'

I said I still couldn't understand.

'Who wants you to understand!'

How did it begin?

'Oh, through a girl I met when I was down and out,

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or almost, and she told me about this gallery. Then as soon as I saw Ellen she took over. She told me exactly what she could sell and asked me if I could paint it, and I tried and I could. She really likes all those fuzzy street scenes, a bit blurred and misty, that's why she can sell them. She's got shocking taste and she dresses all wrong — in the summer she looks as if she's escaped from a garden party in the early nineteen-hundreds. But she's just Ellen, and if she dies first I'll jump into the coffin after her and pull the lid down and I'll be buried too.'

Be quiet! That's horrible.

'It's so horrible I can feel myself doing it, scrabbling the mould back as best I can and locking myself in with her for ever, and if I had the slightest talent I could paint it.'

Then you ought to try to paint it.

'I'm not good enough, and Ellen couldn't sell that, and besides she'd have nightmares and I don't want to upset her. She doesn't understand anything except flower stalls, park railings, and a few blobs of people wearing bright colours in the distance, and a piece of a pretty church fading out at the edges. And wistaria, she's awfully fond of that — I have to paint it simply crawling over every wall.'

Do you make a lot of money now?

I am not naturally observant about clothes, but I had noticed that his suit, although grubby and crumpled, was expensive. His shirt, the collar twisted, one ear up and one ear down, was silk.

He gave a wicked smile. 'Enough for me,' he said, 'but not enough for clothes like these.'

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Ellen?

'Of course. Who else?'

That's splendid, isn't it?

'You needn't be snooty.'

I'm not — just jealous.

'Don't try and smooth it over. I expect you think it's all pretty disgusting, don't you?'

I just think you're lucky to find someone who can afford you.

'Perhaps she can't. Anyway her husband can.'

'As long as he doesn't know . . .'

'He knows all right, and doesn't care — in fact he's all for it. As far as he's concerned, Ellen can have anything she fancies. Do you still want to meet her?'

More than ever — I'd be fascinated.

'I don't know whether you'll like her,' he said doubtfully. 'But she is fascinating. That's just the word. She's awfully good for me, too. I mean somehow she seems able to teach me all the tricks.'

That's nice, too, isn't it?

'Honestly, Marianne, you might be a bit sympathetic. Some men are born knowing the tricks, and some aren't.'

When at last I met Ellen she was quite unlike what I had expected, although I was not sure what I *had* expected.

Tall, with an air of command, she made Laurie appear boyish and frail. Fair-skinned, with very fair hair, an Amazonian walk, and large beautifully shaped hands, she looked as if she would be perfectly happy at a point-to-point meeting. Or I could easily imagine her in a full-

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skirted riding habit, sitting side saddle, surrounded by foxhounds. But I could not imagine her teaching anyone any 'tricks'.

She wore a grey coat and skirt of a slightly outmoded cut, a white silk shirt blouse, several rows of pearls around her throat, and a grey hat with a small curving brim; pinned to the white moiré ribbon encircling the crown was a large old-fashioned brooch, locket-shaped, pearls linked by a dusting of rock diamonds with an emerald at the centre. She carried a pair of long grey suède gloves and gave an impression of being free and uncluttered. I realised she was without purse or handbag.

She took us both to tea at Gunthers where, sitting at one of the tiny spindly tables, she looked like a self-possessed swan surrounded by a collection of chicks. Her low, quick-speaking, lilting voice made practised afternoon conversation, taking a subject, polishing a phrase to fit, adding a neat sentence of personal reminiscence, seemingly frank, giving nothing away, and put the subject aside, finished with until another day. Her eyes were deeply set, bright and blue and seldom still. With elegant precision she poured out tea, speared slivers of lemon and added them to our cups. Manipulating her tiny two-pronged fork deftly, she managed to eat several mille feuilles with hardly a pause in the conversation, while Laurie and I were still struggling with our first cream buns. Once she leaned across the table and with a swift flick of her cambric handkerchief whisked a speck of cream off the tip of my nose. Her smile, apologetic and charming, wrinkled the corners of her small curious

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eyes. That second's gesture, so light and hardly perceptible, made me feel inept and clumsy, a child and yet not a child. I tried to assess her age; all I knew was that as I reckoned age at that time she was certainly not young. What Laurie had said was true: she was Ellen, formidable, oddly magnificent.

After her third mille feuilles she dabbed at her long definitely curving lips with her napkin, brushed imaginary crumbs off her coat and skirt, sipped her last cup of tea, and held out a large well-shaped hand, palm upwards, in Laurie's direction. From one of his pockets he produced a thin silver cigarette case and a silver ring with a spike at the end, speared the cigarette, handed it to her, then lit it from a miniature matchbox in a silver case.

Ellen waved the hand not occupied by the cigarette in a circle, embracing the case, the matchbox, Laurie (at whom she raised her eyebrows in playful reproof) and me. Laurie offered me a cigarette, lit it, then helped himself to one. We relaxed. The ritual was, for the moment, completed.

Ellen's low lilting voice swept us along through descriptions of operas I had never heard and plays I had never seen, functions I had not attended, and a way of life she had presumably once known well, the remnants of which she still clung to, utterly unfamiliar to me.

'There's nothing quite so delightful as the seasonal commonplace, is there? Strawberries and cream on the terrace of the House, for instance, don't you think so? And tho' winter is quite my favourite season I always feel a little sad to think I'll have to wait until June for one of

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those delicious afternoons. And then, of course, there's Eton and always a mother or — heavens how it dates one! — a grandmother to go along with, or stand in for. And just for an hour or two everything is so exactly what it ought to be, always. Don't you feel that, too?

Reluctantly I admitted I had had no chance to feel anything of the kind. In my world the 4th of June had no particular significance, and I had never received an invitation to take tea on the terrace of the House of Commons.

'Oh, but you must, you simply must!' Her enthusiasm made a missel-thrush song of the words. Suddenly she quieted down and said with genuine kindness: 'I'll see that Gussie — my husband — arranges it. Then we can all dress ourselves up and pretend we're grand peacocky people and have a lovely time.'

'Next June,' Laurie said. 'You're an optimist. You can't think your Mr. Chamberlain has saved the world, or can you?'

'My Mr. Chamberlain.' Ellen laughed lovingly at him. 'What a foolish boy you are.'

'Anyway he is your Mr. Chamberlain — he belongs to you and your kind of people,' Laurie said. 'Smiling bravely in Hitler's face and making everything worse by trying to make out it's better.'

'I am what I was brought up to be,' Ellen said firmly but good-temperedly, holding out her hand for another cigarette. 'I hate war as much as you do. But if it comes, it comes, whether I am expecting it or not.'

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'And *when* it comes,' Laurie said, 'you'll be handing out white feathers like your mother did nearly twenty-five years ago.'

'Quite probably.' Ellen sounded amused, unruffled, only the hand holding the silver ring attached to her cigarette shook a little. Turning to me she said, 'Laurie's quite brave, all of a sudden. It must be your influence.'

Suddenly, peremptorily, Ellen thrust her hand in her pocket, paid for the tea, and swept us out of the shop, round a corner into a quiet cul-de-sac and through the swing doors of a small hotel, where she was apparently known. Soon we were sipping unfamiliar drinks from tall ice-misted glasses, while Ellen and Laurie bickered softly about the House of Lords — an institution which Ellen adored and Laurie abhorred. Ellen serene and chuckling, playing *grande dame*, Laurie increasingly petulant, yet to some extent putting it on.

The atmosphere of discord indulged in to a point of ecstasy became too loverlike for my comfort. Gabbling my thanks to Ellen, I tried to slide away, leaving them together.

Immediately Ellen concentrated her attention upon me, wooed me back, smilingly held my hand, wordlessly coaxing me to make a leisurely farewell, afterwards insisting that Laurie should accompany me home.

I protested.

'My dear child,' she said, 'of course we can't allow you to go off like that all by yourself. How preposterous!' Still she held my hand, pulling me down towards her, until my lips touched her fair slightly downy cheek. Releasing my hand at last, she offered it to Laurie.

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'Mind you look after her — take her *right* home,' she said.

By my previous dismissal of the necessity I had stamped myself as a daughter of the lower middle class, able, most disgracefully, to be let loose in a big city and to fend for myself.

Obediently we trotted off, with clasped fingers, like children sent upon an errand, instructed to keep close together, not to lose each other in the busy streets.

When we reached the bus stop I tried to send Laurie back to her, but he would not go. We climbed to the upper deck, and sat in the front with empty seats behind us; it was an inbetween time of early evening and most people had gone home.

'Don't worry.' He spoke at last. 'I'm not waiting for you to say anything.'

I just haven't met anyone like Ellen before, and it all seems so odd, I said.

'What seems odd?' Laurie asked gently. 'Because she's so much older than I am?'

I shook my head.

'Would it still seem odd if she wasn't married?'

Yes, in a way.

'Every relationship is odd to some extent,' he said. 'This isn't odder than most. You just happened to have noticed, that's all. You must get to know Ellen better. You must come and see us.'

Us? I wondered whether he was talking of himself and Ellen, or was Gussie also included?

'The three of us,' he said, answering the question I had not asked. 'I didn't suggest it before because I wasn't

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sure how I stood. Now I'm settled in — part of the household — and now you've met Ellen.'

He wrote down the address and told me they had only lately moved there.

'Before it was only temporary — now it's as permanent as anything is. That's why I didn't get in touch with you ages ago. I don't want anyone else to know, though. It isn't a situation I can defend.'

I asked him whether he ever saw his parents.

'My mother, now and again. She doesn't ask any questions. I don't think she remembers much. Sometimes I wonder if she knows who I am. She's pleased to see me, but she never wants me to stay for long. She's still got her bees and her tapestry work. She talks to herself quite a lot. I think she likes that better than talking to other people.'

Isn't she very lonely? I asked.

The wretchedness of being old and having to talk to oneself came at me like a cold finger touching the nape of my neck, rising upwards in a chilling wave to my hairline.

'No, sweetie, she isn't. You're thinking as if it was you, feeling as you do, living as she does. She's cut herself off on purpose. Perhaps because there are so many things she doesn't want to remember she's decided to forget everything. If she began to remember at all she couldn't choose.'

Selfishly relieved because the burden of being sorry for Laurie's mother had been lifted, I said that I, too, was moving.

'You — and Emanuel?'

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No, Emanuel is moving in and I'm moving out.

He smiled and said that sounded an even odder relationship than his and Ellen's.

I told him there was no relationship as yet.

He accepted this without comment.

Before we said goodbye at my steps, standing with our backs to the laurel hedge — the continuance of which I had so obstinately fought for — I reminded Laurie that only a few days before he had told me his situation was 'frightening' and now apparently he was completely secure and at ease in the same situation.

'I can see your relationship with Emanuel hasn't gone very far,' he laughed at me. 'You don't know much about this sort of thing, do you? You wait — one minute everything will be perfect, and absolute hell the next.'

I said: Oh no, it won't.

As I let myself in I thought about our walk on the Heath, and how I had crossed my fingers, and uncrossed them before I saw a black and white dog, and somehow I knew that Laurie was right.

Waiting to hear from Emanuel, knowing that I would hear, but not knowing when, I tried to busy my mind by thinking about Ellen, even to the extent of imagining what it would be like if I were Laurie, and wondering whether I, too, might have fallen in love with her. But all my thoughts were blurred by the hovering shadow of Emanuel, and every footstep on the stair ought to have been his, but never was.

Less than a week after our first meeting, Ellen telephoned me, and after my first disappointment because it

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was her voice, and not the one I continually hoped for, her quick soft tones brought a flicker of interest, making me feel sought after.

She said she was taking an afternoon off to do some shopping, and hated being alone, and besides she wanted to get to know me. Would I meet her in half an hour?

Bemusedly I agreed.

Although what she wore was different, she did not greatly alter as so many women do alter from one day to another, when they wear higher heels, a darker lipstick or a smaller hat.

Her dated yet dateless charm had a physical intensity like her scent, reminding me of full-blown near-to-falling roses, which she bought in a shop off Jermyn Street, resting her hand upon a velvet cushion while the serious-faced assistant behind the counter sprinkled drops of essences upon her wrist, pausing between each libation for her consideration. Her wrist, her palm, and then each finger was touched by a newer sweeter liquid. She sniffed at each in turn, made a show of hesitating, and chose the same one as before, adding soap, toilet water, and bath oils to her purchases, until the heaviness of fading roses seeped into her clothes, impregnating her skin.

She bought me a light flower scent, offering it doubtfully.

'This will do for now,' she said. 'I'm not sure how you'll turn out, so I can't give you anything you'll like for long. You're not quite yourself yet, are you?'

I accepted the tall pointed glass bottle gratefully, deciding to take her uncertainty not as a slur for my lack

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of maturity, but as a compliment. At least she did not pretend to know me wholly — but then neither did she pretend there was a great deal to know.

We sat and waited for the scents, soaps and bath oils to be wrapped up, and Ellen talked as if we were alone. She treated shop assistants with exquisite detachment, smiling to one side of them or just above their heads.

'Laurie's in one of his moods today,' she said. 'He can't paint if I'm there and he can't paint if I'm not there. He has shooting pains in his arms and seems determined to get rheumatic fever.'

Is he really ill?

'If he can't paint he has to be ill, doesn't he?'

I don't know.

'I know, and he does too.'

She accepted the parcels, hung the coloured tapes over her fingers and, giving one of her sweet vague smiles in the direction of the assistant who opened the door for us, waved me to walk in front of her, saying she had promised we would both meet Gussie at the Albert Memorial in about twenty minutes, and would that be all right?

I hesitated and told her I ought to go home and finish typing a film script that had to be delivered early the next morning.

She dismissed this by saying, firmly, she detested the cinema.

We strolled towards the park.

'I suppose as you're almost family, no actually more than family, you might have hated me, because of Laurie.' As she spoke she looked sideways at me.

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There isn't any reason why I should.

'If it had been the other way round I might easily have hated you . . . Is he happy with us, do you think?'

Yes.

'Sometimes he keeps on about being burdened by a sense of shame.' She managed to speak as though she did not care.

Perhaps he is.

'Only because he's young and likes being dramatic. In fact there's no drama at all. We're all together, the three of us, and we aren't hurting anybody. We love each other — in different ways. Laurie can walk out to-morrow if he wants to, and no one will try to stop him. And of course he *ought* to go — yes, he really ought to get away from us.'

I don't see why — if he doesn't want to.

'There are so many ways of loving people, and as long as one does love it doesn't matter, does it?' Speaking excitedly, she quickened her pace and the parcels swung from her finger, and I watched the parcels swinging and I thought of all the ways of loving people, but what happened when there was only one person to love, and he was never there?

That's what Laurie thinks, more or less — he says all relationships are odd, I said.

She relaxed a little and slackened her pace.

'Sometimes when one is young one thinks love is only a bed when the lights are out — but it isn't like that. I adore Gussie and without him I'd just crumble into little pieces and be blown about by the wind, but as for bed, I just can't — not any longer. He's too old.'

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And you can with Laurie?

'But of course — too much so; he says I feed on him and I'm always hungry.'

I did not want to hear any more, and I was glad when we saw two figures in the distance — one was Laurie, and the other must be Gussie. Somehow his name suited him.

Two by two we continued to walk on.

I heard Laurie explaining to Ellen that his unbearable pains had temporarily ceased, but might return any moment, and then I heard Ellen's gentle coaxing voice half-laughing, half-wooing him back to joy again.

Gussie's unquestioning acceptance of my presence, and the fact that he greeted me — and continued to treat me — as if we knew each other, emphasized the feeling of unreality which the afternoon with Ellen had already induced in me. They seemed to live in their own time, and when I was with them I stepped out of the familiar present into whatever now they inhabited. A few days later I tried to explain this to Laurie who immediately, and surprisingly, lost his temper.

'I brought you into this set-up because I thought you could be relied on to stay yourself,' he said. 'How was I to know you'd get as cranky as they are?'

Gussie must have been about fifty-five; he behaved as if he was much older. A little over middle height, and thin, his egg-shaped face and head were too large for his meagre body.

His clothes, as elegantly outmodish as Ellen's, gave at first an impression of a man in fancy dress. He wore a

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light grey bowler and a tent-like cape of thin worsted, black and white checked. Not until later, or perhaps at other meetings, did I notice the rest of his clothes — high button boots, trousers creased sideways and not in the front, stiff white collars with pointed ends, riding gloves with brown leather backs, the palms and insides of the fingers in coarsely knitted string to prevent the reins slipping.

He walked slightly pigeon-toed, bowing and tittuping around, and had a definite veer to the left. I kept on trying to avoid him, but several times he bumped into me, and I had to put out my hand and give him a firm push into course again, and start him off once more in the middle of the gravelled path, but within a few minutes his bird-like progression to the left edged me on to the grass, where he followed, bumping into me again. When we were outside the park I found his presence even more uncomfortable, because he forced me to tread warily across gratings and pushed me against shop windows.

When we paused before crossing a road I managed to manoeuvre myself to the other side, hoping Gussie would walk over gratings and graze himself against shop windows, but to my disappointment I discovered that he did not veer towards the left, but was compulsively drawn to any companion by his side. In danger of being shouldered into the road, I nipped back to the comparative shelter of the shop windows.

Leaning a little in advance and turning towards me, his face loomed a few inches above and in front of mine, like one of those elongated turnip faces of my childhood. His pale slightly protuberant eyes reminded me of the

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eyes of a king painted by Velazquez, except that Gussie looked more ancient, and had an air of having long since been deposed.

He talked slowly, his enunciation precise; his voice had no undertones and made me feel sleepy. By what he said, or what he did not say, I inferred he had once been in the Foreign Office. I did not doubt him; although he seemed unreal, he inspired belief. To disbelieve would have been as unthinkable as arguing with a voice over the telephone telling one the time.

I asked him, diffidently, why he was not 'there' now.

'Pains in my chest,' he said, 'and I always felt tired. I thought I had T.B., and when I found I hadn't I'd got used to the idea of suffering, dying if you like, being on the edge of finishing, so I didn't go back. Besides we're all dying, and it takes a long time, and once I'd realised I was dying I decided to make an art of it, do it leisurely, devote my life to ending properly, completing the pattern. What do you think of that?'

What *did* I think of that? Frantically I tried to find out, groping in my mind for words, other people's words if possible, always so much more potent than my own when I wanted to make an impression, as, for some inexplicable reason, I did.

At last I said, weakly, I thought it was a pity.

'What's a pity? Dying?'

No, thinking about it too much beforehand.

'No good waiting 'til you come to do it — too late then. And I must say I'm looking forward to it. Oh yes, I am — it will be quite an experience.'

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A shiver of desperate misery chilled me; I could not bear this talk of death, especially in such familiar terms.

'I can see you're like Ellen,' he said, lurching against me. 'She thinks it's morbid. But you can't get away from it, either of you. You're in the pattern too, my dear. You're part of my life now, so you're part of my death too.'

I said I didn't want to be part of anyone's death, and my voice sounded high and strained.

Ellen, striding a few paces ahead with Laurie by her side, looked over her shoulder and spoke softly but with a disagreeable note of command:

'I can't hear what you're saying, Gussie, but you're not to upset Marianne. Telling her you've got T.B. or whatever other nonsense comes into your head, just to get sympathy. If you can't think of anything more interesting to talk about you'd better keep quiet.'

Gussie giggled. A divided sound of nervousness and delight.

'Isn't she superb when she's angry?' he asked admiringly.

I never knew whether he was talking to me or to himself; after a few minutes' silence he began to mutter crossly about Conga, Hong Kong, Birdseed and Multiple Oils. Most of them he was displeased with. Stupidly I wondered if they were friends with peculiar nicknames.

'They won't catch me again, and they needn't think they will. I'm up to their devilments now, but mind you I've lost *hundreds*,' and he bumped excitedly against me; then, realising he had almost sent me flying, he grabbed

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at my arm and set me to rights again. Suddenly I understood: he was talking about shares.

For two or three weeks I seemed to be more often with Gussie, Ellen and Laurie than I was alone. I was drawn towards this strange trio, although I knew my small part in their play would not continue; soon I would be thrust into everyday life again, and their intimate theatre would be closed to me for ever.

I saw Laurie firmly pinned down, helpless, and, not even struggling. I watched Ellen's white hands patting a cushion by her side in case Laurie might absentmindedly sit elsewhere; listened to her creamy voice telling him what to do next, her tall powerfully scented presence arranging his work today, tomorrow, next week, next year, yet breaking her sentences by affectionately mocking parentheses telling him he really ought to get away and make a life of his own.

'Shoo, shoo, off you go, off you go, round the world, somehow, anyhow — you're young, you can't stagnate here, you really mustn't.' In such moods she chanted the words, raising her hands in a graceful theatrical gesture, pretending to push him away.

'At your age I was in China,' she said, 'but of course I can't throw you out, and if you simply refuse . . .' Her voice lifted towards the question she did not ask, while Laurie watched her, a small sideways smile on his mouth, his hand ready to take the hand she so often held out in a swift movement of love and forgiveness for some sin he had not committed.

Then, forgetting all about Laurie leaving, she began to tell him about a new restaurant in Chelsea. 'They've

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asked me to find someone to do murals, and it's exactly your sort of thing, darling. The river and barges and tiny streets, and bits of trees and sky and that heavenly church, you know, the one I like so much . . . ?'

'That's not in Chelsea, it's in Kensington,' Gussie said, 'and when you were his age you weren't in China.' There was no reproof in his voice, he sounded rather proud of her, as if he knew she could get away with anything,

'I *have* been to China, so it doesn't matter when. And who cares where the church is as long as it looks pretty?'

Sometimes they snapped and snarled, then suddenly smiled and kissed each other in such a bewildering succession of moods that I felt bruised and baffled, and yet unable to free myself. Laurie, Ellen and Gussie, tender, tenacious, indecipherable, clinging round my life, smiling or frowning, quarrelling, often on the edge of making love, but with never a moment I could positively put a meaning to.

At one time Ellen's soft words and affectionate glances were often given to me, but after a while indefinably she veered away, and I could not recall exactly when it happened. Either I had not accepted or more likely not understood what she offered, and I was left with Gussie, who did not offer, but took what little he required.

He called Laurie 'dear boy' and patted him on the shoulder. Now and again Laurie called him 'sir' but always referred to him as 'Gussie'.

I became Gussie's 'dear girl' and he took my arm oftener than was necessary, leaning upon me with wilful deter-

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mination to present himself as elderly and infirm. He asked me peremptorily to call him 'Gussie'. When pushed to it I did so, but the name never came naturally to my lips, and I tried without downright rudeness to call him nothing at all.

I was drawn towards the mansion flat they lived in, as children in a fairy story cannot take any other path except the one leading to the witch's house in the middle of the wood.

The rooms were large and lofty, filled with a huddle of furniture; massive serving tables, thick wide sofas upholstered in brown and plum-coloured velvets, music stands without music on them, and several alabaster pillars stood guard in the corners; olive green curtains half obscured the windows. A tarnished silver Kettle stood by a silver burner — wickless — on a small fireside table. The kettle was never used. We drank quantities of lemon tea, prepared by Laurie in the chilly cavernous kitchen. The sweet-scented tea complete with all its dried green leaves and flattened yellow petals was poured into glasses fitted with silver holders. Tiny frosted Viennese biscuits were served on silver platters. Once crisp, the biscuits crumbled in one's mouth, not exactly stale but lifeless.

'Silver is my colour,' Ellen said. 'I don't care whether the stuff gets cleaned or not — besides, there's no one to clean it nowadays.'

'What's Marianne's colour?' Laurie asked.

'Gold.' Ellen did not hesitate.

Soon after this Laurie bought me (no doubt with Ellen's money) a pair of gold-dipped ear-rings, delicate,

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shell-shaped, but when I put them on I stared discontentedly at myself in the looking-glass and wondered whether Ellen had deliberately put me on a false path, urging me to try to become what I could never be — golden and glowing.

Even now when I write of Ellen some disquieting remembrances lead me to come near to making fun of her, in case I might recall her exactly as she was, and begin to look for her, searching the crowded city streets. Worse still, perhaps, if I should find her as she may be now — and as I am.

I believe she may have veered away so that I should lean towards her; not for any purpose, knowing of none, except to be beguiled by her ways, and by what she often appeared to be on the point of saying — and yet perhaps she was not on the point of saying anything.

One afternoon when Ellen and I were alone for a short while — Gussie and Laurie having gone out together — she beckoned me to sit beside her in Laurie's place and put her hand on my wrist and said softly:

*'So now I have confest that he is thine,
And I myself am mortgaged to thy will . . .
Him I have lost, thou hast both him and me . . .'*

"

Then she waited deliberately, forcing me to speak.

If you mean what I think you mean, it isn't true, I said. Laurie isn't mine.

'He'll be more yours than mine in the end,' she said, 'because you don't want him. He can only belong to someone who runs away.'

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He says if you die first he'll jump into the coffin and be buried with you.

'That's fear,' she said, 'not love. He doesn't love me any more than a plant loves the stick it twines round — it just has to have it.'

And you? What must you have? I asked.

'What I can get. Hatred, at worst. Affection will do. Love, if possible — a reason for living.'

And Gussie?

'He's *my* stick. Haven't you worked that out yet?'

No, I hadn't worked anything out.

I asked whether it was enough for Gussie to be that.

'Of course it isn't enough. He has to have something of his own. Look, I'll show you.'

She led the way along the passage, and I followed. Opening a door I had not noticed before, or had perhaps dismissed as a cupboard, she stood aside for me to enter a small high-ceilinged room, its one narrow window obscured by dust. Neatly stacked on shelves and built up in patterns from the floor were piles of empty sugar cartons, cardboard boxes, layers of brown paper, tiers of neatly folded paper bags, hundreds of newspapers, wooden tea-chests, empty bottles set out like skittles, worn-out shoes carefully paired with trees in them, a pile of old clothes folded as if for packing — the discarded paraphernalia of a lifetime.

Ellen smiled at my discomfiture, then she drew me away from the room and shut the door behind us.

'Don't let it depress you,' she said. 'We've all got to have something of our own, and of course there was a

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time when Gussie had more from me — but now I just can't any longer.'

I asked what all those things were for.

'They're not *for* anything. Just possessions. An accumulation of junk — a wall, perhaps, to keep death out.'

But he isn't afraid of dying, I said. He's looking forward to it as a new experience.

She regarded me curiously with brightly watchful eyes; momentarily I had become a person in my own right, not merely an adjunct of Laurie.

'People don't always speak the truth,' she said. 'Anyway it's a wall *against* something — perhaps against life.'

Making some lame excuse, I said I must leave immediately.

Ellen complained gently with a certain mockery as if she knew more about me than I did about myself, saying I was always on the point of departure.

'Can't you ever feel at ease with me?' she asked. 'I'm not difficult or demanding, am I?'

Stiffly I said how could she be demanding? What was there to demand of me?

She smiled and said I was 'very young' and suddenly seemed anxious for me to be gone.

At last I found a flat. A matter of pride made me move as far away as possible from where Emanuel would soon be. So I decided that if I lived south of the river — a part of London I hardly knew at all — I would become a different person, mature and purposeful, perhaps even in time tidy.

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The flat, one large room with bathroom and kitchen combined, was exactly what I did not want. I was handed a brochure setting out the amenities and specifying 'some service' — that ought to have warned me, but didn't. Vaguely I thought 'how nice' and did not anticipate the restrictions. At any time of the day or evening someone could knock on any pretext and practically force an entrance.

Returning perhaps in the afternoon I might find an elderly bunched-up woman desultorily dusting. She was tired and indifferent and I resented her less than the others. The worst was a pertly inquisitive girl who searched the room for evidence — although evidence of what I was not quite sure.

During the days of upheaval before I actually moved Laurie came to see me, sensing I needed comfort, but I felt that he was living in another world and had little comfort to give.

I had seen Emanuel once or twice, brief discussions of days and dates and when I would finally move out and when he would move in. Our arrangements were made as if we might never see each other again, and yet I knew we would — the possibility of an ending before we had begun did not seriously occur to me.

When at last I sat in my new strange room away from any familiar landmark, I wondered who I was, and said my name over and over to myself, hoping the syllables would make me whole again.

Without a telephone in the flat I could not wait for the bell to ring. There was not even a 'public' telephone box in the hall. The large old-fashioned house, inexpertly

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converted, was very quiet. Most of the rooms were empty. I longed for footsteps and doors banging; there was no one quarrelling upstairs, and I missed that too.

At last I heard from Emanuel. He said the flat was too expensive and he had let one room to a fellow student. As they practically never saw each other the arrangement was admirable, and now he would pay me the full amount of rent I had asked for.

My brief reply was a small collection of chilly phrases carefully chosen to give an impression of warmth withheld — and I felt that all the words I had ever tried to write were exercises leading to those two short paragraphs, saying nothing.

On some pretext he wrote again, also saying nothing, but managing to convey an upward inflection towards the end, leaving the way open for me to reply — if I could think of anything to say.

I made myself wait a week before I wrote some meaningless sentence on a postcard.

Three, four, five days passed and still I had not heard.

At first the postman was a friend, and although there was no letter for me I was able, if we met on the stairs, to greet him with a smile. Later the time of the posts became an obsession. I listened, fidgeted about, looked at the clock every five minutes, watched the postman from the window, trying to count the steps he would take if he was on his way to my door, pretending I had not heard him go by, and when he came down again I held my breath and wished.

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Laurie came to see me and put up some bookshelves; immediately they fell down, so as usual most of the books were stacked on the floor.

'Gussie's been talking about you,' he said. 'So has Ellen — but differently.'

How differently?

'As though she cares,' he said. 'I think we've become one person to her, or we might become one person — except you've got away. . . . You oughtn't to have come here. This room's ghastly, isn't it?'

Then he asked me about Emanuel, and I wished I had never mentioned his name.

I've heard from him, I said, but not in the right way. Perhaps I made it all up.

'Don't let go. Grab and cling and suffocate him,' but just don't let go. It works. That's what Ellen does.'

I couldn't, and anyway it doesn't always work — she didn't quite succeed with me.

'Only because Emanuel was somewhere in the background, otherwise you wouldn't have had a chance.'

I asked him whether he had ever tried to paint Ellen's portrait.

'Twice,' he said. 'Once I made her look sixteen, all pastel and underdone, then I tried, as you so contemptuously put it, again, and she looked about ninety, heavy-jawed and eyes half-closed. I can't paint her out of me or write her out of me or think her out of me, and she knows it. By the way, she asked me to bring you some roses but I forgot.'

What do you mean, 'asked you'? Asked you to buy some?

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'No, she handed them to me. A great whopping bunch. I must have put it down somewhere.'

I see.

'No you don't. I didn't think you'd want them. You've got Emanuel. I didn't think you'd want her roses, and anyway I didn't want you to have them. You can't have everything.'

I haven't got Emanuel. I haven't got anybody. And I don't understand why I couldn't have the roses.

'Sweetie, I'm sorry. But I thought with Emanuel lurking somewhere around those great bloated roses as big as cabbages would be in pretty bad taste.'

I said I didn't care what was or wasn't in bad taste, and I thought Laurie was making too much of everything.

'I'm not making too much of what might have been,' he said.

Would we have been enemies by now?

Laurie laughed. 'You're such a baby still. Enemies! Siamese twins most likely. She'd have taken both of us in her stride.'

One Saturday morning my bell rang. I opened the door, and there was Emanuel. He walked in. He looked just the same, perhaps slightly fiercer.

'I don't know what you think you've been doing,' he said. 'I can't get on with my work.'

I don't remember speaking — I suppose I must have done.

Emanuel: never again. Not that again. I spared myself nothing (and perhaps spared him nothing, either). I was

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plain, too short; I could not speak French, Italian or Spanish, and by then I had even forgotten how to say table, chair, sugar, you, and us in German.

He was lonely and had no one else, and resented me because his loneliness had thrust us together and he could not afford to push me aside — not yet.

At first I wallowed in the romance of suffering. After a while I suffered a little in grey reality unrelieved by coloured trappings.

By nature miserly with tokens of affection, he became less and less generous as the weeks passed, sickened as he was by my freely acknowledged need. I threw my love at him; he caught it, used it, but seldom spoke. I was too tangled in my own emotions to realise that he needed me as I needed him — but differently.

If ever he admitted affection — apart from one golden sentence that left his mouth by mistake — he admitted it grudgingly.

Once when he was half asleep and had not chained his words up he said he would never forget me, never let me go.

'In a special way you are the first and only — not quite the first, but different from anyone else, always. Without you I couldn't . . . just couldn't . . . not ever . . . my heart,' he said, sounding surprised. 'Yes, you are my heart.'

Perhaps I was for a few weeks, a month or two or three or four (there are times when time does not exist) and might have remained so for longer if only I could have kept quiet, and accepted his whole or half love as a present due to me, showing neither astonishment nor joy:

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if only I could have acquired a graceful immobility and folded my hands like Laurie's beautiful lady. Instead, no doubt, I made a clamour and filled in Emanuel's elliptical phrases with all the words I was greedy to hear, and gave them back to him at inopportune moments.

Feeling he had been trapped into an expression of tenderness, immediately he turned away, became sullen and scowling, uncommunicative to the point of brutality.

Outside in the streets — and everywhere, so it seemed to me, except where the two of us were locked together in our claustrophobic conflict — preparations for war continued. Watching deeper larger trenches being dug in the park nearby, I realised to my shame I had hardly bothered about the probability of war, and the only sharp fear I had was the possibility of losing Emanuel for ever. I could feel the past slipping away, the present crumbling in a decay of dreadful days, and the future a roar of guns and a crash of planes, a scurrying and screaming of wounded people, and a space around me where Emanuel now was, and from which he would soon be gone. It was never a question of whether he would go, but when.

When I was desolate enough I was able to some extent to stand aside and to watch how many moments of ease were murdered by his knives of snubbing phrases, calculated gasps of boredom, or plans for a future from which I was excluded.

Accustomed to read as though my life depended upon it (as before he came it did) for weeks I almost forgot how to read. Previously I had read desperately, conscious that there would never be enough time.

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Suddenly I could not concentrate. The book I was half way through when I met him was left unfinished. The characters who had been part of my daily experience became a collection of ghosts called up by someone else's mind, formless and unnecessary. During train journeys I made the familiar gesture of opening a book and turning the pages; an occasional sentence had some meaning for me, but the whole slipped by in a jumble of unrelated words.

In my flat there was no privacy. The housekeeper knocked on the door to tell me that the water had been turned off at the main for two hours, and within twenty minutes she was back again to tell me that the water was now on.

Soon the situation became impossible. Any time we spent alone together would have to be in Emanuel's room, although I disliked the idea of returning there, and would only do so on the few occasions when the man who shared the flat was away.

Completely unpredictable, Emanuel's feelings swung between tepid affection and furious jealousy. On one of his last afternoon visits to my apartment he sulked, and after a few minutes of silent staring out of the window, suddenly he asked:

'Who's that?'

Who's what?

'That man opposite. He keeps looking up.'

Why shouldn't he? He's got to look somewhere.'

'I can't stand it,' he said.

Can't stand what?

'I'm not a fool. That man's waiting for me to go.'

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It's a bus stop, I said.

'Oh, very funny. Very convenient, too, isn't it?'

He moved away from the window, his face pale and angry.

I believe he wanted me to hit him, and I wish now that I had done so, but the beautiful simplicity of such a response never occurred to me.

Without any idea of self-protection I arranged my days to fit in with his. I was never entirely purposeless, even if all I did was to wait until I heard from him.

Although often apparently caring little, he could not allow me to belong to myself, and bit by bit he winkled scraps of information from me, adding them together to make a whole person whom he accepted as a temporary measure, but never really liked, and perhaps never quite trusted.

Instinctively able to nose out danger, he took little notice when I mentioned Laurie, but at the sound of Ellen's name he became alert and interested.

In a moment of rare confidence he showed me a snapshot of his mother, a tall smiling woman, handsome rather than beautiful, standing on the steps leading to the Sacré Coeur, hair blowing in the wind, her whole attitude vivacious, expectant.

'She died years ago,' he said, as if it was of little consequence.

Sometimes I wondered whether he had never forgiven her for dying, and he was getting his own back by his temporary choice of me; small, insignificant, unsure.

'I wish she could have met you,' he said. 'I'd like to know what she would have thought.'

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He never considered what I would have thought of her.

She had a quality of Ellen about her, and looking again at the photograph I felt uneasy.

For a while he almost convinced himself — but not me — that we ought to get married; this phase did not last for long. It was evident that he found most women ridiculously unlovable. It was not because he had loved his mother so much he could not care for another woman. I felt that he might have adored her occasionally — but I doubt whether he had loved her at all.

When he was in one of his tamer moods I asked him why he had made such a point of telling me he was not a Jew.

'It isn't that I care, and not that you'd care either, I suppose, but I get tired of people thinking I am and saying a lot of their best friends are Jews, proving how damned broad-minded they are.'

After he had spoken he had a disconcerting habit of pausing deliberately to see what stupid remark he could provoke from me.

I said that he did not seem entirely English.

'And I don't feel entirely English, thank God. Do you?'

I don't feel patriotically English, I said. But I don't feel a foreigner.

'I don't ever want to feel I belong to any country. All I want is power. Power to go where I like, to get a job, to stay as long as I like, and then to move on. And I'll get it, although I'm all alone, and I haven't money or the right kind of background.'

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What sort of power?

'Not over people,' he said. '*The moving finger writes and having writ* — that sort. A whole city to plan, not an office building pretending to be a cathedral because the local council says so. And I want my judgments to make, not break. I'll have all the breaking done by my minions.'

Gradually I began to work out the pattern he had in mind. Whatever he said, in whatever objective terms, he wanted power over men: women, of course, did not count.

Continually he emphasized the points of difference between us — like a thumb pressing on a nerve.

'I always hurt people, and I shall only hurt you, too,' he said, and I wondered how he could have managed to hurt so many people in so few years.

'You ought to wear brown or green,' he said, 'not that appalling pink. And why do you paint your fingernails?'

Added to these small cruelties were small acts of love — or remorse — when he bought me books he could not afford, and almost threw them at me, saying before I could thank him:

'When anyone loves me I feel quite sick — you mustn't.'

Continually he instructed me to be cold and remote, but unless I was numbed by misery such behaviour was not in my nature.

The misty greyness outside the windows, the incessant talk of war in the streets, and between Emanuel and me the chilled sadness of frequent departures and meetings marred by trivial misunderstandings, sometimes these

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gave me the desperate courage to turn away from him. As soon as I did not care, Emanuel cared for me.

'Darling Marianne,' he said. 'Everything's wrong, but without you it isn't living. I don't want to lose you, ever.'

Then why are we always quarrelling?

'I have to quarrel with people, especially you — in case you expect——'

I don't expect.

He did not believe me, and perhaps it was not even true.

I did not know how to deal with his rushes of need coupled with indifference. When first he came to see me the everyday household things, even cups and saucers, to my fevered eyes were not good enough. Things he regarded with disfavour as being too expensive, luxurious, not in the best of taste.

Money did not count with him: he withheld nothing — except kindness. Although he bought me books he could not afford, he would not spend a smile on me until I had reached a point of near annihilation — a being deprived of will and personality, and then he gave me the comfort of his affection — when I was past comfort. So only in retrospect did his love make its mark.

I played this game of love as inexpertly as I had played other games; initially with clumsy enthusiasm, soon tiring, unable to anticipate the next move. Defeated almost before I began, I could not release myself from the flurried round of catches and returns. Emanuel made the rules and arranged the penalties.

Eaten by some worm inside him, he could not resist

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gnawing at the edges of our small portions of happiness. Often he watched me with such curious detachment that I locked the door against him while I scrambled into a dress or combed my hair, feeling a violent distaste for his eyes. 'What a tiresome girl you are with all your scents and powders,' he said. 'Aren't you sick of disguising yourself? It's you I'm interested in, not all that stuff you smear on your face. Besides it's such a waste of time.'

What else did we do with time except waste it? Getting nowhere, and tearing each other to pieces on the way with a dreadful necessity of loving, knowing that it would all end in nothing, that we would each be alone again, but worse than before, missing what we used to have, perhaps unable to find it again, ever.

Often he flung a few sentences at me which seemed to be the end of some conversation he had had with himself.

'What do you know about me? But you'll make up your mind exactly what I was like according to what you become and what you think of yourself — and whatever you decide won't have anything to do with what I am, or what I want to be. I hope you'll forget me, and not meddle with my life by thinking about me.'

Perhaps he sensed that somehow, sometime, I would try to use everything.

I listened and I did not go away; Emanuel was a part of my life, and I had to live it.

I had moved far enough away from the north of London to have to take a train to where Emanuel now lived and where I had once lived. A small wandering train with dirty almost empty carriages, cutting around the

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heart of London, linking outlying suburbs that I associated in my mind with the names of cemeteries.

Day-dreaming through the hours, shivering a little from tiredness, fretful and slightly fearful, I became a person concerned only with imagination and emotion, hardly conscious of what was happening around me.

Sometimes the platform was empty; Emanuel was not there to meet me. Often to deceive myself I caught an earlier or a later train, telling myself that I could not expect to see him when I had arrived at the wrong time. Although I knew he could have counted on finding me, restless, excited and impatient, long before his train was due, and often I had waited for the next train, and the one after that, walking up and down the cold grey plinths of stone between the railway lines until there was no hope at all; until the last possible train stood deserted in the station, and he was not on it.

Only when we were together with at least an afternoon and evening and some hours of the night in front of us, could I read once more.

We seldom kissed. Sometimes we stood for a few seconds silent in the room when the door was shut, and then the rhythm of being together took over, and I threw my coat on the nearest chair, kicked off my shoes, lit a cigarette and collapsed on the bed, tired from my eyes to my toes.

Give me something to read, I said. Something: anything.

O saisons, ô châteaux . . . quelle âme est sans défauts?
Stretching like a cat that has been cooped up in a basket, I sang the words softly to myself.

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Gratefully I ate or drank whatever was offered: weak tea, coffee, fishpaste sandwiches, dry biscuits, sweet pickled gherkins out of a tin. I would lie for hours smoking and reading:

*Why should only I of all the other princes
in the world be shut up like a holy relic?
I have youth and a little beauty . . .*

Whenever I held out my hand Emanuel threw me any book that was on the table in front of him without 'bothering to glance at the title; I opened it and immediately began to read:

*He thought he saw an Elephant,
That practised on a fife:
He looked again, and found it was
A letter from his wife.
'At length I realise,' he said,
'The bitterness of life!'*

Warm, at ease, all tension gone, sometimes I slept, while Emanuel made notes, drew diagrams, made notes, occasionally grunting either with pleasure or dismay. Ambitious, prickling with resentment that occasionally rose to hatred, poor, proudly conscious of being a natural rebel, an enemy of any society, he continued to draw diagrams and to make notes. Now and again I wondered whether he was partly playing at being the abstracted student so that I could not fail to notice how ill-matched our lives were, and how trivial and limited were my concerns compared to his.

Often two hours passed and still we had not spoken.

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On the whole I had little need of speaking, and did not greatly care whether or not I was spoken to. Time took longer when there were no words to push it on, and yet it slid by too quickly. While I drowsed and whispered to myself *O saisons, ô châteaux* an afternoon had gone.

I could accept the hours of silence because they came easily to my nature, but I never learned to accept with equanimity his sudden bursts of apparently reasonless bad temper, although I tried to stiffen myself against them.

And I did learn to sleep at least a third of the night, sharing a far too narrow bed; to enjoy the warmth of Emanuel's body beside me, to listen while he slept when I could not sleep.

Some nights we did not go to bed at all, and if we did more often than not it was merely to sleep; by then we were both exhausted, almost unloving.

His hands were usually gentle, but I had the impression that they might not always be so.

One night he shook me awake and whispered roughly: 'Tell me about Ellen.'

The inappropriateness of the words and the moment made me suddenly panicky. I said there was nothing to tell, and when he shook me again and repeated the words, I mumbled Laurie's name.

Taking my face in his hands, his fingers pressing hard and hurtfully against my temples, he spoke the words aloud this time:

'Ellen Ellen Ellen! Not Laurie — who cares about him? Ellen's the one I'm interested in.'

As accusations produce guilt, I felt guilty whenever I saw her.

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Later I began almost to dread the mention of her name, knowing it was a prelude to a bout of Emanuel's relentless questioning. Even when Ellen and I had not met for days, Emanuel insisted that her scent clung about me like stale pot-pourri.

'If she's important enough for you to have this mysterious relationship, why can't I enjoy her company too?'

I said we had no mysterious relationship and I did not think he would like her.

From that moment he was determined to meet Ellen and perhaps determined to like her too.

When the night was nearly over I dozed unasily, unable to disregard the early morning light already showing through the cotton curtains, while Emanuel slept so soundly by my side, and I realised he would always be able to sleep, no matter who shared his bed, winding himself up cosily in the bedclothes, turning his back on the interloper. He did not care sufficiently to be wakeful; at first perhaps he did, not later.

And when I was on the point of leaving he had only to say, 'Next weekend?'

Yes, next weekend. I never paused or pretended to consider.

Sometimes he said:

'I might manage one day in the week if I get through enough work — Wednesday or Thursday.'

'Which day? Make up your mind. Suddenly I was angry.'

'Wednesday — if it really matters.'

Snappily I told him nothing really mattered.

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My anger hardly touched him; my displeasure pleased him.

I made an effort to become unlike myself, in case he might fall wholly in love with my opposite, someone self-sufficient and practical, but I did not succeed, and if I had succeeded it would have made no difference.

We bickered about everything, and yet we could not let each other go. We even argued about free will over breakfast.

'You're a Determinist,' he said smugly, 'and that won't get you far. Determinism is a philosophy and you aren't a philosophical type, are you?'

How presumptuous of me to be a Determinist, especially by mistake, I said.

Perhaps my voice had a sharper tone than he had heard before. He looked puzzled as if he had been scratched by a kitten, and from that moment I enjoyed unsheathing my claws and became more expert in the use of them.

Our hours of content were even less frequent. Emanuel retreated into longer silences, until his deliberate rejection of speech was like an affront, and my only defence was to scold and clatter my way through, banging doors on trays with a maximum of noise, opening and closing windows, making an imitation Bedlam in a restricted space.

When I was spiteful he loved me again, but being spiteful on purpose is tiresome, and one cannot always be at the top of one's form. Closeted together in a room the strain often became intolerable, although when we were out of doors the old enchantment occasionally returned. After one disastrous evening, walking silently

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to the station we paused on the edge of the park to look down on the lights of the city a mile or more away, and suddenly everything was perfect between us, and our only torment was that we must leave each other.

Emanuel never forgot those moments of perfection, and somehow never forgave me for them.

'I don't know why you can't always be like that,' he said. 'I simply don't know why. You were absolutely heaven then.'

But perhaps a part of me did not want only to be absolutely heaven for Emanuel.

My feelings for him had little to do with what he was, or what he felt for me, only with what I was compelled to give. Although there was no immediate comfort, I knew I had to bear with my obsession and hoped it was a phase I would grow out of.

To some extent I confided in Laurie, and Laurie became as anxious to meet Emanuel as Emanuel was to meet Ellen. All the arrangements were made before I could draw back, and I was appalled to find that I had agreed to take Emanuel to dinner one evening — a formal invitation such as I had never previously received.

'I'm perfectly willing to squander an evening on these peculiar friends of yours,' Emanuel said, 'but I'm not going to be taken along.'

When the evening came I was late starting out, and I lingered on the way, not anxious to arrive. Already, no doubt, Emanuel had explained to Ellen his plan for pulling down all the old buildings beginning with the Guildhall and the Tower of London, a systematic destruction over the next twenty years. He had probably told her

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she was an anachronism, her furniture a disgrace, and that people like her and Gussie had no right to be alive.

Laurie opened the door. He looked far from pleased. He snatched my coat, gave me a little push towards the drawing-room and said in a low voice: 'I thought you were never coming. Now go in there quickly and break it up.'

I went in there quickly, but I could not break it up. Emanuel looked very handsome when he smiled, and having become accustomed to smiling he actually smiled at me.

Ellen blew me a kiss, and she and Emanuel continued to talk, both at once, evidently delighted with each other's company.

I sat as far away as possible. Laurie brought me a glass of sherry, then fetched his own glass and the decanter. We crouched together on the sofa feeling underprivileged.

'Where's Gussie?' I asked desperately, trying to think of something to say.

'He's rearranging his toys,' Laurie said. 'You know, all those empty boxes and moth-eaten clothes. Some of them fell down. And you needn't try to make polite conversation — they can't hear; and if they can they don't care. Don't you realise she can get anyone she wants? You needn't argue about it — it's true. So if she wants him she'll get him, and where shall we be?'

Where we were before, I suppose.

'What happens to me if I'm chucked out and that monster you've been nurturing moves in?'

Don't be silly. Emanuel wouldn't do that.

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'Why wouldn't he? What's so wonderful about him that he wouldn't take what he can get?'

He's very proud — and touchy.

'He's not being all that proud and touchy now, is he?'

No, but he will be tomorrow or the day afterwards. He *can't* stay civil for long.

'But I know all the moves, expensive lunches, interminable teas, luscious little dinners, and an enormous amount of interest and asking questions.'

Emanuel wouldn't play, I said. Ellen would have to live hard and sparse — cabmen's shelters and not a bite Emanuel can't pay for.

Laurie looked shocked. 'I didn't know he was all *that* loopy.'

A pity you're not a bit more loopy yourself. It's the nicest thing about him, and although I'm sick to death of the beastly food I wouldn't want him any different.

'If you're sick to death of beastly food you've got a treat this evening. Ellen's just about the worst cook in the world.'

She was, too.

The rest of the evening weighed heavily; Gussie joined us at dinner, eating abstractedly and saying little, and immediately afterwards slid off to stack some more papers and build up his empty boxes; then Laurie played the piano rather badly while Emanuel talked to Ellen and I sat ill-wishing them all.

Ellen insisted on giving Emanuel some money so that he could take me home in a cab. Emanuel accepted the money without much fuss, and I wondered if he *was* all that proud.

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When we were in the cab Emanuel talked about Ellen, and I listened.

The faded furniture, the dated clothes, the jewellery, the keeping-up of appearances, the rigid belief in King and country and the Conservative Government, all these aspects of her were entirely admirable.

But she's everything you hate, I said at last.

'No, she isn't. She's herself. Not a copy of what she'd like to be, or an imitation of what she thinks I'd like her to be. She's herself — complete and perfect.'

The next morning Laurie came to see me. He looked pale and unhappy and kept on walking about.

'I can't stand this place,' he said, 'there's always somebody shuffling around outside the door.'

So we went out.

We walked along the Sunday-quiet street each waiting for the other to speak.

'Your oafish Emanuel certainly made an impression,' he said at last. 'Ellen's convinced he's going to be the greatest architect ever.'

I shouldn't worry, I said. It won't be for long. She'll find him too uncomfortable.

Laurie walked more quickly than usual and I was glad not to have to talk because I needed all my breath to keep up with him.

When we saw a café I lagged behind. I wanted a coffee — and a rest.

'I'd rather have a drink,' Laurie said.

But that's not like you.

Laurie didn't answer.

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We sat on a seat by the river, watching the dirty cloudy water aswirl with matchboxes, discarded cigarette packets and ice cream cartons.

'I've promised not to tell anyone,' he said. 'No one at all. Not even you. But I'm going to tell you, and you can go and bawl it out in the streets for all I care.'

Tell me, then, and don't make such a fuss about it.

I smoked a whole cigarette before Laurie spoke again.

'Gussie isn't as complaisant as I thought,' he said. 'I mean sometimes he was *comme ci comme ça* about me, and perhaps suddenly he'd had as much as he could stand. After you'd both gone Ellen went on and on about Emanuel, how wonderful he was, and what splendid ideas he had, and Gussie came back in the middle. She didn't take any notice of him, not even a glance — just as if he didn't exist. Then they went to bed.'

Suddenly Laurie said he would like some coffee after all, so we walked back towards the café.

'Gussie always sleeps in the dressing-room. She hates him in her room, but he must have pushed his way in, and they were both shouting like mad.' That's what woke me up. Then Ellen screamed and I could hear Gussie padding about and then he called me, and I went in. It was unspeakable. Ellen sitting on the edge of the bed swaying to and fro with her hands over her face and blood trickling between her fingers and actually dripping on the carpet, and Gussie mumbling and mopping about with wet towels looking like death and pretending he'd had a nightmare and had tried to find the table lamp and couldn't and somehow knocked it over and it fell on

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Ellen's face. So I phoned for a doctor and Gussie went off with her in an ambulance — and here I am.'

I tried to say something, but there wasn't much to say.

'I didn't see her face,' he said, 'just masses of blood.'

Perhaps it really *was* an accident?

'With all that shouting? Besides the nightmare story is absolute nonsense. They weren't even undressed. No, he must have gone crazy and picked up the lamp and clouted her. The awful thing is I can't blame him.'

I don't really want any coffee now, I said. So we walked back to my flat. Laurie would not come in.

'I suppose I've been lucky,' he said. 'I might so easily have done it myself.'

Where are you going now?

'Home, and you needn't look like that. It *is* my home, and I haven't any other.'

I even managed not to tell Emanuel but I wondered whether he knew because he never mentioned Ellen again to me.

A week or two later Laurie wrote telling me to forget it all. Ellen was better although badly scarred, and as soon as she was well enough the three of them were going away.

Ten days or so after that I received a postcard from Spain, without any address:

Here we are, Laurie wrote, It is dusty and hot. Ellen speaks a lot of Spanish very fast and waves her arms about. Gussie sits in the Public Gardens with a newspaper over his face and sleeps. There's too much atmosphere. Wish you were here (but not Emanuel).

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He signed his name with his usual flourish; the capital L had many twirls and loops.

I wasn't sure if I did wish I was there — on the whole not.

During the time Laurie was in Spain I only heard from him once more. A letter told me they were now in Malaga and Ellen had become enamoured of bull-fighting.

Above all enchanted by any matador, pseudo or otherwise, who promises her the tail or the ears, or whatever titbit she fancies. She's still more than half on the shady side, and Gussie's still sleeping. Ellen sends you her love but I send more of mine.

Years afterwards I met Ellen at a party, and I have not seen her since.

I noticed the scar beginning at her temple, trickling down one cheek.

So it *was* true.

She was fitting a cigarette into the silver ring with the spike at the side.

Suddenly she saw me, smiled, and we moved towards each other. Her eyes were still bright and curious, her hands as beautiful as I had remembered them.

Without any preliminary greeting she said:

'Only one more operation, and it probably won't show at all.'

I could not even recall how long ago Laurie had left her. He had probably made his final escape when the war began and he joined up.

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'Do you think Laurie will always care for me a little?'

Perhaps.

'But not enough?'

I shook my head. No, not enough.

As far as I knew, Laurie had almost succeeded in forgetting her — except he shuddered if offered tea with lemon served in a glass; Ellen and he used to drink it by the hour.

She put one hand lightly on my arm with the possessive graceful gesture I knew so well.

'I do think it's important that people should continue to care, don't you? There's nothing worse than being cast off like an old shoe. I really prefer Gussie's method, don't you?'

And what is Gussie's method?

Before replying she offered me a cigarette and lit it, leaning towards me, her scent spicing the air.

'Keeping everything,' she said, 'paper bags and boxes and old clothes . . . At least it shows a sort of tenderness. Anyway, what's happened to Laurie? Who has he taken up with now?'

I had no idea, but a sudden need of hitting out, as Gussie had hit out, made me say that I thought he was learning self-control and hadn't taken up with anybody.

'What does he want to be self-controlled for?'

Perhaps because he's tired of being ashamed of himself.

'Oh, that!' Her laugh was soft and low, untouched by time. 'As if it matters!'

And I wondered whether it did.

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The evening with Ellen, Laurie and Gussie was in effect the end between Emanuel and me, although we played out the final scene a month later.

We pooled what money we had to spend a weekend together, choosing a drab hotel in a dreary village which someone had recommended to me years before.

Emanuel complained incessantly about the food, telling me that I would choose a finicky middle-class establishment where he couldn't get enough to eat.

With an indefinable feeling that this might be the last time, I made myself look at him as if it was the first time, and listen more carefully to what he said, although he did not say much.

Young as he was, his hair was beginning to recede; either he had not shaved well or perhaps he had not shaved since yesterday. Around his wrists and along the backs of his hands a fur of tiny hairs sprouted. His oval well-shaped nails were not quite clean. The jaunty near-suède jacket was greasy down the front; his grey flannels slack and creaseless. His manner, instead of being off-hand, youthfully arrogant, was merely insolent.

I told Emanuel that if he wasn't careful he'd get seedy.

It was on Sunday morning when I said this, and I suddenly felt that I had had enough, and after I had spoken I picked up my case and opened the door of our room.

With warm amusement and a more adult quality of loving than he had ever given me he said: 'Don't go, please don't go. Why can't you always be like this?'

Like what?

'Chilly and detached. It suits you.'

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But I knew that being chilly and detached was unnatural to me, and I could not keep it up, and I would not want to, either. If he could not accept my kind of love he was not worth my loving.

'Is there any reason why you shouldn't have lunch with me? For the last time?' Emanuel did not sound as unconcerned as usual.

Not here, I said quickly.

'No, of course not here.' He mentioned the nearest market town.

Not if you mean one of your vile street stalls with streaky bacon sandwiches and bread dipped in rancid fat, I said.

'Just this once we'll do it in style.'

The hotel we chose had gilded pillars and red plush chairs; the dining-room was almost empty. We ate tiny portions of tepid food. The coffee was black and tasteless.

Afterwards we made our way to the station and found we still had two hours to wait for a train to London.

We walked arm in arm along streets leading to nowhere either of us wanted to go, while Emanuel sang softly *John Brown's body lies a'mouldering in the grave, John Brown's body lies a'mouldering in the grave, but his soul goes marching on. John Brown's body lies a'mouldering in the grave—*

Oh for heaven's sake, not now, not now!

I heard my voice rising to a scream. I was behaving exactly as he wanted me to behave.

'Why not? It seems an excellent choice. And it saves trying to make conversation, doesn't it?' He spoke cheerfully. 'I'm still hungry. Aren't you?'

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Although I wasn't hungry we went to a coffee stall where I sipped hot milk blended with coffee-coloured water while Emanuel gobbled bacon sandwiches.

'So I shall get seedy, shall I?' he asked amiably. 'That won't be any affair of yours, will it? Aren't you glad? I'm not your sort at all, am I? Better get rid of me while the going's good, otherwise you'll be saddled with someone who doesn't fit in when the great big war begins in a few months' time. I'm not going to be dragged in, so I'll probably be thrown into a British concentration camp — the kind of place you'll all be fighting a war to put an end to. But of course it's quite different *here* from *there*, isn't it? Sorry, I oughtn't to have said "fighting". Fighting is vulgar. We just wage war, don't we? Waging is fine. But you've never expected me to be civilised, have you?'

Suddenly I asked him to go, to leave me and to go away quickly.

As soon as I had spoken the rain began, rushing out of a grey sky.

'Why couldn't you stay the same? Why aren't you exactly as you were when I first saw you?' He put his arms round me for a few seconds, kissed me with surprising tenderness, turned up the collar of his imitation suede jacket, and walked off.

I stood in the rain, watching him, waiting, no doubt, for him to look back, to show that he had not forgotten I was there — but he did not do so.

I noticed how tall he was, how quickly he walked, and I remembered all the times I had trotted by his side trying to keep in step with him.

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In the train I felt I ought to make some gesture to show how utterly wretched I was, and I beat the cushions experimentally — and rather lightly to be on the safe side — with one fist. A lot of dust came out, making me sneeze. When I had stopped sneezing I found I was not so utterly wretched after all.

Chapter Eight

ALTHOUGH not utterly wretched, I *was* lonely.
I telephoned Alfred.
He sounded surprised to hear from me.

Alfred, darling, are you busy?

I used the old coaxing voice.

'No, but——' Alfred said.

There had never been any 'but' before.

He asked me home to dinner. I refused. We arranged to meet for a 'quick drink' in a nearby pub. .

The solid reality of his presence was a reminder of the security I might have had. He looked more prosperous, better dressed. His face was fuller; the lines of laughter around his eyes had not deepened.

His expression became alive when he saw me.

'Hello, my love,' he said, throwing a fleshy arm around my shoulders.

Still?

Anyone else would have continued the game — not Alfred.

'Go and sit at that table in the corner,' he said. 'What are you drinking?'

I told him and I went and sat at the table in the corner.

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He returned carrying two glasses, placing them carefully on the small cork mats. As usual, slowly, deliberately, he took his time.

'Here's mud in your eye,' he said, raising his glass.

Haven't you even stopped saying that, Alfred? But how silly . . .

'What do you mean, haven't I even stopped saying that? You want it all ways, don't you? Want me to be different and to love you as if I was the same?'

Yes, perhaps.

'You're still the same,' he said. 'Always mooning about. Quick enough when it comes to what other people are thinking, and quick enough getting your hands on them again, and never doing anything about it — except with someone you pick up, but that's different, that's your choice.'

That isn't fair, I said. Don't you remember the evening when you said you were going to marry Bessie? It wasn't my choice then — it was yours.

'Remember? I've never forgiven you for that, and I haven't forgiven myself either.'

You walked out. You can't blame me.

'Can't I? I do. You oughtn't to have done it at the last minute.'

I didn't do anything.

'No, we didn't, but you made me think we might have done, and because we didn't I've cursed myself ever since. You've always treated me like a dog. Good Fido, trust Fido, don't touch, guard — and throwing me a bone now and then — at the wrong time.'

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It wasn't the wrong time that evening, was it? It was up to you — you could have done as you liked.

'It never occurred to you to say what you'd like, did it?'

Not exactly, but then one can't.

'Why not? You don't find words all that difficult.'

I couldn't because——

'I'll tell you because what before you make up any of your nonsense,' he interrupted. 'Because you didn't know, so you thought you might as well try me out — just because I'd been so kind.'

You're not kind now, I said.

Suddenly he drained his glass, fetched himself another before I knew what was happening.

'And not polite, either,' he said. 'I need this — it isn't for pleasure. I often wondered when I'd see you again, and then we have to meet in this slummy place, and you, just the same, treating me like a dog.'

For heaven's sake stop saying that, Alfred. All this dog business . . .

'No, you wouldn't ever treat a dog like you've treated me. You wouldn't just throw a bone and not care. Might splinter and hurt him. You're fine with dogs. You've treated me worse than any dog.'

A raddled middle-aged man sitting at an upright piano not far from our table winked at me. 'You've got him all worked up, dear,' he said. 'Let's have a tune, shall we?'

Alfred flushed angrily and looked ready to hit out.

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I put my hand on Alfred's arm. Don't, I whispered, please don't. It isn't worth it. You've had too much to drink.

'I've had too much to think,' Alfred said. It was the only time I had ever heard him trying to make a joke.

The man at the piano winked at me again, and began to play an out-of-date waltz, singing the words huskily, off-beat: *I'm dancing with tears in my eyes . . .*

Alfred gave a grunt of laughter. 'We only wanted this, didn't we? An awful old queen and a tinnny piano — now the party's complete.'

Do be quiet, he'll hear you, I said.

'What's wrong with that? I can hear him.' Alfred was truculent.

'Never mind, dear,' said the man at the piano, finishing his half-pint of beer, 'no offence meant, none taken. Let's have something a bit more cheerful: *Never saw the sun shining so bright, never saw things going so right . . .*

Alfred slumped lower on the chair by my side.

Buy him something, I said, nudging Alfred.

'Buy *who* something?'

I nodded towards the man at the piano who looked sideways at me. Suddenly he changed the song and tried even harder:

Ler-hife is just a bowl of cher-herries

'For Christ's sake why am I supposed to buy him something?' Alfred asked.

He isn't doing that for fun, I said. He expects a drink. Besides you were awfully rude.

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'Oh, very well.' Alfred signed to the barmaid. Within a few seconds the man at the piano was raising a pint tankard in our direction.

*Take her to dance
Take her to tea
It's stunning
How cunning
The lady can be*

'Come on,' Alfred said, 'I've got to go now. I don't know about you.'

Yes, I suppose so.

*Now we'll start a fashion
For the girl friend*

'Shut up,' Alfred said over his shoulder to no one in particular as we walked out.

His large well-polished car was, parked a few yards away.

'Get in,' he said, 'and I'll drive you home.'

I pointed to my own small mud-spattered vehicle very recently acquired.

Alfred walked up to it. 'That yours?' He stared at the windscreen.

I nodded, yes, that was mine.

'God help us,' he said, 'as if I couldn't have guessed.'

He fetched a large damp chamois leather from the boot of his car, and cleaned not only my windscreen but the windows too, inside and out.

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'Don't you ever want to see where you're going? Don't you *ever*?' He sounded exasperated.

Yes, of course, I said, but somehow——

'Oh, for crying out loud! You're always so keen on going to new places with new people with new faces, and you always end up by being the same. It would *all* have been different if only you hadn't been so damned . . .'

Alfred, don't! Please don't. I can't stand being scolded like a child. I just can't take it.

'Here.' Unexpectedly he thrust the large damp leather into my hands. 'Keep it. Better to see where you're going. Keep it. That's right. It won't bite. You'll lose it soon enough like you've lost every*hing.'

Before pushing me into the car he gave me a hug; it hurt.

'Bye, lovie,' he said. 'Be good, and mind how you go.' But he did not shut the car door, just stood there, looking down at me.

How's Bessie? I asked belatedly.

'Bessie?' He considered this for a few seconds. 'She's Bessie — no worry at all.'

And the baby? 'I tried without success to remember whether it was a boy or a girl.

He smiled. 'Just old enough to start fidgeting with her hair.'

He shut the car door, then suddenly opened it again.

'Where's Nicholas? Did you leave him at home?'

My eyes filled with tears. A few large drops fell splashing on my hands holding the steering wheel far too tightly.

Dead, I told him: meningitis. Otherwise he'd be here.

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'Oh, darling, darling . . . Now what's the use of me cleaning your windscreen so carefully and then you go and cry all over your face so you can't see anyway?'

Suddenly Alfred reached the second of decision, banged the door shut and walked quickly off.

Nicholas and Alfred merged fleetingly into one person, then faded into the past of living and dead creatures lost to me.

Chapter Nine

WHEN the postman's visits had ceased to have any significance for me, I received a letter from Mrs. Dean:

What about a nice little weekend, or longer if you can manage it, by the sea now that Spring is on the way? (she wrote). No paying of course — as our guest. As soon as poss. Anxious to see you. Thel sends love and I remain your Affec. Friend

A. Dean

As an afterthought, the A had been crossed out and Alice substituted, showing either an urgent need of my presence, or an endeavour to establish a more personal relationship.

I wrote immediately, saying that I would arrive the day after tomorrow.

Mrs. Dean was paler, and her face had more folds than when I saw her last. Beneath her small rounded chin the flesh pouched into a sack that fell straight down to the collar of her dress. The effect was not so much of a double chin but of a monstrously swollen neck.

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She looked at me kindly but critically.

'My, you've got thin,' she said. 'You're very smart, though.'

I knew what she meant. I was too made up, my clothes were too brightly coloured, the whole effect was slightly bizarre, especially in the sea-clear light.

She said she was glad I had come, adding not that I could do anything, but in a tone which showed she expected me to be able to.

She looked so mournful that I asked whether Thelma was ill.

'Call it that if you like.' She spoke angrily. 'She's well enough in her body, and I wish I could say as much for her mind. If you ask me, she's going off her head. That's the kindest thing to think, and if I didn't think that I don't know what I'd do, and if someone can't give her a jolt goodness knows what'll happen.'

I realised that my rôle was to jolt Thelma.

Jolt her out of what?

'You just wait and see. I'm not going to be accused of gossiping. You just wait and let it come at you like it came at me. You'll get a shock, I warn you. She's gone and got herself engaged — *engaged*, if you please — and wears a ring on her right hand because *he's* got to get his family's permission before it can be official. Family's permission indeed! They'd jump for joy if they knew what he's got his eyes on. She won't get my permission, and I told her so straight. She's a silly gawk of a girl if ever there was one. I don't know how I came to have a daughter like that.'

I did not have long to wait.

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The man who had fallen in love with Thelma was Japanese; his name was Kenji.

What he most liked doing (apart from taking Thelma out, which apparently could only happen occasionally as every obstacle was put in his way) was sitting very still and quiet neatly arranged in a chair, his feet lightly together, his small delicate hands placed one on top of the other like sleeping birds, his soft dark eyes watching Thelma. While he watched her his lips parted slightly towards an expression of a smile.

The first time I saw them together Kenji was leaning over her, his small square-shaped face, smooth-skinned, near her bright red hair, and he was talking about music. Thelma looked up at him, but did not speak. As soon as possible I left them, because the room with the two of them in it had no need of me.

Kenji was studying to be a solicitor and when he had passed his Finals he intended to return to Tokyo, taking Thelma with him.

Gentle on the surface, he gave an impression of being capable of ferocity. Mrs. Dean he tolerated because she was Thelma's mother, and his respect for family relationships even included a woman entirely alien to him. Sometimes I thought that he regarded both Mrs. Dean and me as moderately interesting animals; he noted our antics and wondered what we would get up to next.

Early on that first evening I saw Kenji and Mrs. Dean sitting silently 'staring each other out'. He had arrived at his usual time, and he was waiting for Thelma to return.

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Kenji, his hands folded, his feet together, looked at ease, yet alert. Mrs. Dean was flopped in her chair, her face expressionless, only her hands moved occasionally when she cracked her fingers. Either Kenji was impervious to the noise, or perhaps he had schooled himself to disregard it.

'You'll know me when you see me again, won't you?' Even Mrs. Dean's surface impassivity was wearing thin. She fidgeted a little in her chair, sighed and pretended to look with sudden interest out of the window.

Kenji decided to accept this statement factually.

'It is my good fortune to have the pleasure of knowing you.' He gave a formal half bow, hardly more than an inclination of his head, towards her.

I had the impression that he was controlling a smile. His mouth was grave, his eyes jet-bright and amused.

'Whatever your pleasure is you can't get much out of sitting here,' Mrs. Dean said.

'I am content if my presence is not an inconvenience.' Kenji was menacingly polite.

Worsted, Mrs. Dean muttered that he was at liberty to stay as long as he liked. From a pile of newspapers on the footstool by her side she snatched at one haphazardly and made a pretence of reading.

'Why should I not go and meet Thelma?' he asked in his soft smooth voice. It was not the first time he had put the question.

'Because you wouldn't find her,' said Mrs. Dean. 'She's doing a bit of shopping for me on the way home. There's nothing wrong with it here, is there?'

'It is most comfortable and I am happy to remain.'

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'Of course I know it isn't grand. Not what you're used to, I expect.'

'This room is beautiful,' Kenji said firmly and coldly, not looking at the room, but continuing to stare at Mrs. Dean.

'We'd like to hear about your home, wouldn't we, Maryanne?' Mrs. Dean's pale eyes blinked towards me.

I was obliged to agree although conscious that all Kenji wanted to hear were Thelma's gliding footsteps on the narrow pavement outside, and the sound of the old-fashioned latch being lifted.

'It's interesting to know how the other half lives, isn't it? Come along, Kenji.'

I noticed that whenever Mrs. Dean spoke his name Kenji made a slight movement of withdrawal. If he had not been innately good-mannered I would have said he winced. She made it sound harsh and unpleasant: *Kenn-gee*.

Kenji resigned himself. 'Our house is in a ward of Tokyo—'

'Now let me see, a ward . . .?' Mrs. Dean sounded doubtful.

For a moment Kenji lost his command of English. His dark eyes glanced in my direction with the nearest expression to an appeal I had yet seen.

A suburb? I suggested.

He smiled. 'Yes, that is it, a suburb. Very pleasant, very residential. We have a sitting-room, as one has here, although our furniture is not the same. This is oak, is it not, Mrs. Dean?'

She nodded complacently. 'And old,' she said, 'really

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old. Most of it belonged to my grandfather and he was over ninety when he died.'

Kenji congratulated her on her grandfather's longevity.

Prodding Kenji to describe the furniture in his home, Mrs. Dean inferred that there was probably no furniture, that he and his parents lived in mud huts.

'Our sitting-room is perhaps more . . .' he hesitated, 'more French. We have a round table in the middle of the room covered with a brocade cloth, tiny chairs with tapestry over them. It is very formal' — suddenly he smiled, a wide enchanting smile — 'and not so comfortable.'

'I'm all for comfort before style,' Mrs. Dean said.

'Oh, but you do not understand,' Kenji explained urgently. 'That is only our *sitting-room*. It is not for comfort. We do not like that room. It is for our guests, and in particular our Western guests, friends I meet in Tokyo and wish to entertain in our home. It is for people who prefer to sit on chairs. For ourselves and for our personal friends we have the room we use every day, where we talk and read.'

'For people who prefer to sit on chairs,' Mrs. Dean repeated, emphasizing the words. 'Well, really, I should think it's difficult to find people who *don't* prefer to sit on chairs.'

'But you do not understand.' Kenji was becoming enthusiastic. 'We do not like chairs. We have our *tatami* mats.'

'And you put the mats on the chairs?' Mrs. Dean was stolidly determined to misunderstand.

'No, they are on the floor,' Kenji explained patiently.

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During the short bleak silence I wondered how many errands Thelma had had to undertake for her mother. She had been expected home half an hour ago.

What kind of mats? I asked desperately.

'Very beautiful,' he said. 'Thick woven straw, very springy, sweet smelling.' Each mat bound with a black border, stitched by hand.'

'And what is the name of this ward, this suburb, where you live?' Mrs. Dean sounded as if she did not believe a word.

'Shibuya,' he said, his voice dealing lovingly with the word. 'Shibuya.'

'Shee-boo-yah.' Mrs. Dean sighed. 'Well, I never,' she said. 'It all seems very odd to me, very odd indeed.'

After another short silence Mrs. Dean returned to the attack:

'That would be a fine thing, sitting on the floor,' she said. 'What would happen to me? I couldn't squat on the ground. If once I got down I doubt whether I'd get up again. Haven't you any respect for old people?'

Kenji pressed his lips together; his nostrils widened.

'In such misfortune,' he spoke softly, 'naturally a chair would be at your disposal.'

'If I had the misfortune to live too long? Is that it?'

Kenji looked harassed.

'But certainly not. If you had the misfortune to be less agile than formerly. In our country we are accustomed to our *tatami* mats, and we find them no hardship at any age.'

At that moment Thelma came in; tremulous, breathless, excited, her pale red hair, lightly uptilted at the ends,

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blown by the wind, half-hiding her face. She carried a basket filled with parcels.

Kenji rose, smiled at Thelma, gave her a formal little bow, and took the basket. Mrs. Dean held out her plump hands towards the basket and grabbed it. 'You haven't forgotten anything, have you, Thel?' Mrs. Dean rummaged around disclosing packets of needles, cottons, a face flannel, a tube of cold cream, several bottles of medicine, a phial of tablets, and a pair of shoes from the mender's.

'If I have,' Thelma said, 'it will have to wait until tomorrow. I'm late enough as it is.'

Kenji murmured a few soothing phrases and remained standing while Thelma ran upstairs, saying she would be ready in a few minutes.

'And where are you two proposing to rush off to?' Mrs. Dean asked accusingly.

Kenji mentioned a hotel about thirty miles inland.

'Very expensive.' Mrs. Dean folded in her lips. 'Still, if you've got enough money to waste . . .'

Kenji said, gently, that he did not consider an enjoyable evening a waste of money.

We heard Thelma running down the stairs. Opening the cupboard door she stepped lightly into the room. Washed and powdered, her hair newly brushed and shining, she looked younger than she was. She put her hand on Kenji's arm, and in a flurry of goodbyes they left us.

'What the end of this will be I can't guess, and don't like to think of,' Mrs. Dean said. 'Of course it's just a silly season as far as Thel goes. She can't marry a Japanese

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and spend the rest of her life sitting on the floor, can she?’

But you wouldn’t mind if she spent the rest of her life sitting behind the counter of a shop, would you?

Mrs. Dean took no notice of this. ‘Once he got her out there,’ she said — ‘not that he ever could get her out there, but just supposing he did — she’d be treated no better than dirt.’

What nonsense, I said. Who told you that, anyway?

‘Someone who knows more than you do,’ she replied mulishly. ‘Mr. Willow, who used to run the travel agency and retired last year, was given a bonus, a round-the-world trip. He says Japan’s not a country for women. He says if Thel goes there she’ll be treated no better than dirt. He’ll help — A man can help where a woman can’t.’

Who?

‘Why, Mr. Willow, of course. It’s all very well you telling me to do nothing. I’ve done nothing, and that hasn’t got me very far. Thel’s making such an exhibition of herself too. Letting a Japanese drive her about in an open car for everyone to see. I’ve had plenty to put up with already. People are talking.’

What’s it to do with them?

‘And they’ve been staring in the windows. I’ll have to do something. Things can’t go on like this.’

What *can* you do about it?

‘I’ll have her talked to.’ Mrs. Dean made it sound like an operation. ‘Properly talked to.’

People can’t be talked out of feelings, I said. And if they can they ought not to be.

‘But people can be talked *into* feelings, though.’

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You couldn't talk Thelma into marrying Leonard, could you?

Mrs. Dean disregarded this.

'That Kenji's so polite he's rude. He doesn't think it worth while bothering with me, but I've heard him with Thel — he can open his mouth all right if he wants to — billing and cooing when he thinks no one else is listening. He's artful, that's what he is, and I don't know how to deal with him, nor do you. We're no match for him, that's the truth of the matter.'

But what is he being artful about?

'Worming his way in here. If my husband was alive he'd send that Kenji about his business double quick, and no mistake.' In spite of these brave words Mrs. Dean's tone was doubtful. 'With me to egg him on,' she added. 'I do see he's got a way with him, and I'm not against him just because he's Japanese. No, it isn't only that. Besides he must be all of six years younger than Thel. And he's more foreign than he need be. It's like having somebody who hates you in the house.'

'I said I was sure he did not hate anybody, although I wasn't sure.'

'You can't tell, not with him. It gets on my nerves not knowing. If I've got to be hated I'd rather be hated straightforward without all that bowing and crocodile smiles.'

Later in the evening she made an effort to interest herself in me, 'but I was there to forget Emanuel and not to talk about myself — and least not yet, and not to Mrs. Dean — and I was relieved when she returned to the theme of Thelma.'

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'It makes you wonder what they mightn't get up to,' she said. 'All those hours together, and then the car, and Thel's a silly girl. You can't stop people feeling human, can you? This isn't like London. There's roads over the Downs miles from anywhere.'

I said I thought they were both too fastidious, and besides Thelma was a romantic.

'Can't see much romance in going round with a Japanese six years younger than she is, and not nearly as tall, and quite *dark* . . .'

Mrs. Dean yawned and wiped her watery eyes.

'You go up when you like,' she said. 'I'm staying here. No point in my going to bed when I couldn't sleep.'

I sat with her until nearly midnight. For the last hour Mrs. Dean dozed uneasily with her mouth open, occasionally jerking herself back to consciousness for a few seconds, then dozing off again.

When I said goodnight she repeated obstinately that she had no intention of moving until Thelma was safely back.

Over an hour later the commotion began.

First the noise of a car braking, then voices and car doors slamming, frantic fingers trying the latch, and Thelma's voice high, slightly hysterical, demanding to be let in. Kenji's voice, low and distressed, answered her, trying to calm her down.

Mrs. Dean's voice joined in saying heavily she was coming, she was coming, and I heard her slow dragging footsteps crossing the room, the front door opening, and Mrs. Dean, Kenji and Thelma all speaking at once, Thelma's agitated tones rising above the others.

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I put on my dressing-gown, combed my hair, powdered my face. Even at such a time with the commotion continuing downstairs I felt sufficiently detached to prepare myself in case I was needed.

Suddenly there was a lull in the noise below, the front door was opened then closed again, followed by the dull sound of a bolt being pushed into place, a car door slammed, gears crashed (unlike Kenji's smooth movements), an unnecessary revving of the engine, and the street outside was quiet again.

Breaking the silence, I heard the sound of crying from the room below, interspersed with Mrs. Dean's impatient comments:

'Do pull yourself together, Thel!'

Thelma's sobs and gasps continued.

'You'll make yourself ill.' Mrs. Dean was shouting now. 'Do pull yourself together.'

Between sobs Thelma called my name.

As soon as she saw me Thelma said, 'I can't talk. Someone's got to talk for me. You've got to talk for me, Marianne.'

Her face was flushed and swollen, her eyes almost hidden by puffy eyelids, her hair tangled and untidy.

I persuaded her to take off her coat, to go upstairs and bathe her face.

Mrs. Dean sighed. 'We can't help what we are, but by and large give me men any day. Oh, they can be nasty all right, but there's not all this screeching about.'

When Thelma returned she was still gasping at intervals, but the tears had ceased. She refused to sit down and

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walked around the room touching pieces of furniture as if she wanted to push them out of the way.

Please, Thelma, please, I coaxed her. Do tell us what has happened. Do try.

Thelma plumped down in a chair furthest from her mother.

'No good working yourself up, Thel,' Mrs. Dean said. 'No good upsetting yourself like this.'

'Nobody upsets themselves,' Thelma said viciously. 'You've upset me. You know it. You did it on purpose.'

'You brought it on yourself. I meant no harm. What-ever I do is done for the best.'

'Then you're stupid, and it's wicked to be as stupid as that. Wicked!'

Mrs. Dean whimpered a little and wiped her eyes.

'You're wicked, Thel. I'm your mother and I meant no harm and you tell me I'm wicked. That's wicked!'

'You tell Marianne what you've done. Go on, tell her.'

'No more than I said I'd do.' Mrs. Dean was defensive. 'I said I'd get Mr. Willow to give you a proper talking to.'

'And that's what you call a proper talking to, is it? Getting that awful old man to jump out on us.'

'How dare you say that! How dare you! And him a friend of your father's too.'

'A horrible old man with his beastly threats.' Thelma seemed exhilarated by fury. 'I'll sue him,' she said grandly. 'Yes, that's what I'll do. The slanderous old beast!'

'You can't. You've got no reason.'

'I've plenty of reason. What he said was obscene.' Thelma spoke very loudly and clearly.

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'You're always making a fuss and exaggerating. What *did* he say?'

'Do you really think I'd tell you what he said?'

'I don't see why not.' Mrs. Dean added with haughty irrelevance, 'After all, he was a friend of your father's.'

'If you say that once more,' Thelma said, 'I shall scream.'

'That wouldn't be much of a change. You haven't done anything else for the past hour.'

'Whose fault is that?'

'Yours,' Mrs. Dean answered promptly. She sounded as if she had decided to enjoy herself. 'Getting yourself mixed up with a Japanese! Whatever was said, you had it coming to you.'

'So you know what was said, do you?'

'How can I know what was said if you don't tell me?'

'I'm not telling anyone except my solicitor.' Thelma sounded grander than ever.

'Your solicitor! Don't talk such rubbish. You haven't got a solicitor, and the only one here was a friend of your father's — *and* a friend of Mr. Willow's.'

At that Thelma gave a deliberate piercing yell, and for good measure kicked a fragile side table; as it struck the floor the thin pedestal broke, and the small flute-edged table top spun twice and crashed into another equally fragile table and sent a large white china dog smashing down into dozens of fragments that flew over the room.

'There!' Mrs. Dean was triumphant. 'Now see what you've done. Now see where temper gets you. Just look at that!'

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Thelma opened her mouth preparatory to screaming again.

Suddenly there was a thumping from next door. It sounded as if someone was banging on the ceiling with a walking stick.

Thelma closed her mouth.

The silence was beautiful.

The next morning I saw Kenji in the village. He had parked his car near the slipway and he was sitting on the sea wall. As I walked towards him he rose and came to meet me.

'What is the situation this morning?' he asked.

I said I thought that Thelma and Mrs. Dean were not on speaking terms.

'Mrs. Dean dislikes me, and for that I do not blame her. But I do blame her for influencing Thelma. That is bad.'

She's frightened of you, I said.

'She is only frightened because I do not lose my temper. In our country to lose one's temper is a sign of weakness. It is a luxury only for the uneducated.'

Kenji began to walk more quickly, turning suddenly along by the undercliff path, a narrow ledge strewn with pebbles, bunches of slimy seaweed, and shells thrown up at high tide. I slithered after him, nearly fell and clutched at his arm to save myself.

I said, crossly, that for all his priggish strictures about well-bred people not losing their tempers, it was evident that he had lost his.

His cheeks became smooth and expressionless again, losing the outlines of anger. Suddenly he smiled and we

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continued our walk more slowly, shouting at each other because the wind blew our words away.

Mrs. Dean isn't an educated woman, I said. You expect too much.

'It is not essential for a woman to be educated to behave with courtesy.'

People are at their worst when they're frightened. It isn't a question of courtesy or discourtesy.

'Because of what she did last night she has made me her enemy,' he said. 'Now is the time for her to be frightened — not before.'

As we walked in the direction of Seaton, the sun on our faces, the wind blowing us onward, I realised that I had arrived in the village ready to pour out my own troubles, to be listened to, commiserated with, and comforted. Now my troubles were already merging into the past, and surrounded by the miseries of others I felt stimulated and cheerful.

When Kenji asked me, diffidently, whether I had known Thelma and Mrs. Dean for long, I found myself able to talk easily to him. I even gave a self-mocking précis of how I had spent the last few months, describing Emanuel, without any consciousness of choked-down tears or great regret. When Kenji laughed (the first time I had heard him laugh) it was a triumph for me. I had taken a piece of secret wretchedness, spread it out, and made myself look at it, and realised that it would soon appear — although not just yet — almost ridiculous.

Where the cliffs dipped down to a valley we scrambled up the sloping steps cut in the chalky surface to reach the springy downland and, turning, made our way back.

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The sun was behind us and the wind fought us with such violence that I had to spin round to get my breath. Talking was impossible; we walked silently, side by side, banded together against the gale.

Automatically we did not take the main path leading directly to the village which would have necessitated our passing Mrs. Dean's cottage, instead we followed a track that brought us out by the pond. We sat on the seat where Thelma and I had so often sat together, where we had talked about life and love and Leonard.

Kenji asked me whether I would consent to accompany him to the village pub. 'Unless,' he said, 'you would prefer not to be seen with me in front of people who know you.'

A sudden tury settled like phlegm in my 'throat.' I snarled at him.

'It is being in England that makes me like this,' he said. 'Sometimes I worry because I know if Thelma comes back with me she will feel even more of a foreigner, and perhaps forever. Although she would not be treated as I was last night. She would not be shouted at and threatened, and told to leave the country, and worse which I have no intention of repeating.'

I'm very sorry that happened, I said. Mrs. Dean is a stupid woman. She would have done better to talk to you herself.

'So you permit me to buy you a drink?'

We sat on a wooden bench in the courtyard.

I accepted the cigarette Kenji offered.

'I cannot even buy these,' he said, throwing the packet down on the table, 'without being mocked at, made to

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feel a stranger. The man who serves me warns me against English vegetables, tells me they are poisoned.'

Oh, but you don't understand—I began.

'You must excuse me, I understand very well. He is explaining the soil is unwholesome for me, that I am not wanted here, and I ought to return to my own country.'

'No, that isn't true. He said the same to me. I'm sorry. You're having a bad time.'

'Last night was bad, not only because of what happened, but also because of my disappointment. Thelma's behaviour is not what I require.'

What do you require?

'A woman must be dignified,' he said. 'We do not approve of women who are excitable and speak loudly.'

'You must admit she had good cause. Besides, she was angry on your behalf, because you had been insulted.'

'She spoke ugly words against her mother, and in the street, too, for everyone to hear. That is not right. In our country respect for parents is essential.'

If you care for Thelma enough, I said, take her away. Take her away now, before it's too late.

He disregarded this and asked me questions about myself. I told him about the walks round the churchyard Thelma and I used to take in the evenings, the second-hand books I bought for a few pennies, the warm soft-centred doughnuts, the sweetstuff shop.

'Are the shops still there?'

Some of them.

'Will you show me? May I come with you? Let us buy exactly what you used to buy then.' He sounded renewed.

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We took the narrow path by the side of the pond, out into the village street.

We bought doughnuts and ate them as we walked along. They tasted good, but not as good as I remembered them.

The shelf of secondhand books had gone, so we chose a few Penguins instead, then on to the greengrocer's which was also the sweet-shop. I noticed the uneven flag-stones on the floor; the centre of each stone worn away. Memorials to the many waiting feet, moving a little with cold or impatience, but never moving far.

On the shelf behind the counter were large bottles containing the sweets I bought when I was a child; the sweets children still buy: striped brandy balls, large pear drops, little Tom Thumbs, licorice bootlaces (good value in time and trouble; I tore off each strip separately, being careful not to bend or break, before I permitted myself to eat), and sherbet bags, each with its wooden stick; some, slightly more expensive, had licorice funnels so that when the sherbet had either been sucked up and eaten, or providently half eaten, half stirred into water to make a fizzy drink that bubbled at the back of one's nose, there was still the licorice left, a fast black and sticky mouthful. Afterwards one had to remember how dark and treacherously one's mouth would be, and how the sweet powdered sherbet always managed to spread itself over one's face even as far as the falling piece of hair that was once a fringe. So after the sherbet and licorice there had to be a cleaning up before I could go home. When I had splashed my face over the jet of the village fountain and dried and polished it on my handkerchief, my father

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often said: 'Look at that child! Look at her shining face! It will burst into flames any minute. Can't you do something about it, child?' Then I bounded upstairs to dab some talcum powder on my nose and cheeks, but often the powder, too lavishly applied, stuck in lumps, and I had to rub it all off again, and my face shone more un-aesthetically than ever.

Kenji was gently shaking me by the arm, asking me what I would like. I chose haphazardly a few sticks of licorice and two large bull's-eyes. Sweets I had once, but now no longer, wanted.

'I still cannot understand about last night.' Kenji sounded puzzled. 'In my country we do not make such disturbances. If that man wishes to communicate with me, why does he not write?'

On the same day that Kenji received a polite but firmly worded cable from his father requesting him to return home with all possible speed and pointing out that at such a time of preparations for war Kenji's place was with his family, in his own country, Mrs Dean fell downstairs.

She bruised her knee on the cupboard door at the bottom of the stairs, sprained her wrist, and took to her bed, saying, dramatically, that now Thelma would be able to leave her bedridden mother to die alone, unwashed, unfed, and uncared for, while besottedly she followed Kenji to Tokyo, where he would immediately desert her, and she would spend the rest of her wasted life washing up in the Japanese equivalent of a cheap cafeteria.

'Unless there is a war,' Mrs. Dean added with relish, 'and then you'll be shot — after they've tortured you.'

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Thelma said nothing, biting her upper lip, making her nose look longer and more pinched; this became her habitual expression during those first days after Mrs. Dean's accident.

I asked Thelma if she wanted me to stay, or if she would prefer to be rid of me. She begged me not to go and we took it in turns to trudge upstairs with trays of food.

Mrs. Dean demanded meals at regular intervals, and became fretful if luncheon was not handed to her exactly at half-past twelve; tea at four; by seven o'clock she was either fierce or weepy if her supper tray had not arrived. She pushed the food around with a fork and ate little. She kept herself going by 'snacks' which she would 'fancy' at any hour of the day or night; mugs of hot milk sweetened with honey; dry biscuits thickly spread with butter; a few dates, a bunch of grapes, a spoonful of lemon jelly, a sliced banana covered with whipped cream, a tiny glass of port, some snippets of cheese. The kitchen was crammed with odds and ends of food Mrs. Dean had asked for, pecked a mouthful of, and then pushed aside. All the cats of the neighbourhood were fed on the quantities of sole, plaice and herrings Mrs. Dean had 'ordered' for luncheon or supper, and then decided she could not eat.

When the doctor said the swelling on Mrs. Dean's knee was 'going down nicely' and she would be able to get up for an hour or two each day and walk around her bedroom to 'get the feeling of her legs again', Mrs. Dean had a sudden relapse culminating in a frightening attack of asthma. She gasped, tried to cough, gasped

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again, sounded as if she was choking, and her cheeks, usually lard pale, became mottled, red and blue, netted with veins; her lips were dry and cracked, a faded purple colour at the edges as if she had just eaten blackberries.

Propped up with three or four pillows, each breath a tearing sound, her small eyes¹ moved disconcertingly, telling us she knew perfectly well what was happening around her, even if she could not speak.

Once Kenji came to visit her, but she coughed so alarmingly, and with every gasp a sawing sound of pain, that he left within a few minutes. Her small restless eyes followed him out of the room, and when he had departed her cracked lips relaxed.

Even Thelma was relieved to shut the door behind him. Kenji had faded to a background fantasy, to be put aside for a happier day.

When we thought that Mrs. Dean had taken to her bed for the rest of her life, suddenly she decided to get up and to resume her day-to-day existence, to horrify us by her endurance.

Bathed, dressed, unshapely, the palms of her hands sweating with the effort, with Thelma in front and me behind her, she insisted on tottering downstairs. Instead of sitting quietly in her chair, cracking her fingers and complaining, Mrs. Dean was intent upon killing herself while we watched her do it.

Slowly, with grunts and groans, she filled bucket after bucket at the kitchen sink and swilled down the small stone courtyard and the steps leading to the back garden. She tottered out with cans of water spiced with dried manure to throw over the rose bushes, muttering 'what

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grows must be fed'. Most of the manure water went over the hem of her skirt and her feet, and she returned to the house pale and martyred, anticipating pneumonia.

Angrily refusing all offers of help, she continued to wear herself out. The trifling assistance she required from Thelma was the pushing in of her jet ear-rings.

'I'm so sorry to be a nuisance, Thel,' she said. 'It's my wrist. I can't seem to manage these.'

Thelma, looking pinched and sick, fiddled around ineptly trying to find the minute holes pierced in the heavy lobes, while Mrs. Dean sat quiet for once, with a self-satisfied expression on her face, occasionally wincing when Thelma tried to push the tiny gold hoops in at the wrong angle.

If Kenji's name was mentioned Mrs. Dean began to make peculiar rending noises, as if she had whooping cough but the whoops never came.

I dreaded Thelma and Kenji going out together in the evenings because I knew that Mrs. Dean, blue-faced and inert, would have to be half lugged, half pushed upstairs into bed, where she would lie with folded hands, eyelids fluttering, apparently waiting for death.

Once, tired and dispirited after such a performance, I whimpered softly to myself, turning my back on her, pretending to look out of the window. I was crying for myself, for Thelma, for Kenji, and for Mrs. Dean too. I felt her will for death seeping over me, drawing me towards her. For a few seconds I thought how easy it would be to lie beside her on the bed, to drowse off into nothingness, to catch death from her as one might catch a cold. I remembered how dusty the carriage seats were when I

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had said goodbye to Emanuel; I saw again the coloured posters suggesting holidays in Cornwall or the Trossachs.

I had not cried like that, more or less openly, careless of being seen or heard, for months, perhaps for years; I was crying for love lost, for dogs dead, for life irretrievably muddled. Crying for Nelf who no longer wanted me to laugh with; for Alfred who might by now have quite forgotten that he had ever loved me; for Hans, so handsome, so light-footed, yet who was everything I would have fought against if I had been a fighting person; for Ellen whom I might have loved in a different, kinder world. My tears hovered over Laurie's name but did not fall. Laurie was no crying matter; he would always be there one moment and gone the next, losing or winning a new love, telephoning in despair, or writing postcards from Portugal or Penzance saying *you simply must meet the most wonderful person in the world*, and within a week it would all be forgotten and Laurie would be back again looking for the next most wonderful person because the last was not wonderful after all. I was crying for Emanuel too; oh, most of all, most of all for Emanuel, who would never cry for me. Emanuel to whom I offered everything, absolutely everything — but only to the Emanuel I had made up, not to the Emanuel whom I found, who was more than occasionally uncouth, uncaring, and who offered little to me.

'Everyone's down in the dumps,' Mrs. Dean panted. 'I don't know what's come over the world. What are you snivelling for?'

Incensed by the word 'snivelling' I turned round, ready to snap, but her face, mottled and old, stopped me. I

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said, briefly, that everything had somehow gone wrong. Shaking the tears away, stiffening myself against her intolerable sympathy, I remembered the one creature who had never failed me: Nicholas. I knew that most of the others had been stage effects, but the sorrow of his death was imprisoned in my throat and might never be released.

'Come on,' she said, 'come on,' and with one hand she patted the coverlet, and I knew that if I had been near enough she would have done the same to my arm or to my shoulder. 'It'll all pass,' she said, 'everything passes soon enough. What is it? Can't you tell me?'

No, I could not tell her. I remembered the small but unforgettable horror of the blood and stench and the dog's wild cry, and how he had dashed himself against tables and chairs and walls, and how in the end the vet took him away — and I paid someone else to come and clear up the mess. And now there was nothing left of him except a note which I still have beginning, *I regret to tell you that your dachshund . . .*

So when the worst happens one can seldom take it; someone else removes the dying dog, scrubs the floor, sprinkles disinfectant, while one sits with one's face in one's hands, and yet in this grief still protecting oneself, saying, 'No, I can't bear it. Someone else must do it.' And I remembered Mr. Vale, who must have sat hour after hour, while his mother lay cold and stiffening upstairs, and yet he could not visit her, and she too had been taken off, like a dead animal — the only difference, she was not in a sack. And I tried to understand why life continuing is important.

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'You'll have to get a hold of yourself,' Mrs. Dean said. 'I don't know what has happened, but whatever it is you mustn't let it get you down.'

In her dealings with me she was firm and shrewd with an underlying kindness. Only with Thelma, her daughter, was she lacking in understanding. I believe she thought of Thelma as a piece of herself that had escaped and 'gone wrong', requiring catching, subduing and caging. Sometimes I wondered whether she despised Thelma who had not wandered far and was easily caught.

I sat by the window, numbed, half thinking, while Mrs. Dean slept or seemed to sleep, and I listened to her rasping breathing.

Suddenly she opened her eyes and said:

'It's all right now when it's spring, and summer mightn't be so bad, but unless you get a hold of yourself you'll never stand the autumn, and what about winter?'

Although I did not reply I knew what she meant. September and October, a little of summer's heat mingled with a sharp smell of coming decay, and afterwards winter, a closed-up season, a time for re-grouping the year in one's mind.

'If you don't make an effort and get a hold of yourself now,' she said, 'who knows what will happen?'

'Kenji has had another cable,' Thelma said; 'a furious one this time, long and expensive, and with lots of instructions, commanding him to return.'

And will he?

She nodded. 'He's booked his passage already.'

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When?

'Next week.'

What about you?

'He couldn't take me with him anyway. I'd have to go later.'

You will go, won't you?

'We keep on talking and talking, but it all gets further off and nothing seems real any longer, except this ring.' She touched the delicate lacing of pearls and garnets. The gold band, worn thin by nearly two centuries of fingers, was looser than it used to be. 'And somehow this is only a token of what might have happened and not a promise any longer. Then there's mother — what about her?'

Hasn't she any relatives she could stay with until she's better?

'I can't think of any — and she needs so much looking after. I believe she'd manage to die, just to spite me, and I'd never forgive myself. Besides——' She hesitated.

Besides what?

'Sometimes I wonder if I've got enough courage to begin all over again. It would be such a dreadfully different life, and I've always been afraid.'

You can't go on being afraid for ever, I said.

Thelma was not convinced, and when I left to return to London the next day, no decision had yet been made.

'I won't just disappear,' Thelma said. 'So unless I write you'll know I'm still here.'

Nearly four months later, on the first of September, I went back to the village for two days. This time I stayed

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at the one and only small hotel, refusing Mrs. Dean's invitation to sleep in the cottage, although it was arranged that I should spend my last evening there.

Thelma greeted me with habitual affection. She looked stunned but resigned. Although still slim, I noticed a peculiar thickening below her waist, and I realised that she was acquiring the same pear shape as her mother.

Mrs. Dean's woolly rug, or another very like it, was now folded over the arm of Thelma's chair, and I felt sure that in the coming winter evenings Thelma would wrap herself up in it and soon she too would ask if everything was 'all right' and complain about her sciatica and the draughts under the door.

'You'd better go up and see mother,' Thelma said, 'otherwise she'll get upset and start banging on the floor.'

Mrs. Dean was lying on a Victorian day-bed. She was able to move about a little but unable to walk downstairs. She said, vaguely, that her legs kept on giving way.

Long jet ear-rings dangled as usual from her heavy lobes. Over her shoulders she wore a black knitted shawl although the evening was warm and windless; a pale green blanket was wrapped around her feet and legs.

After greeting me she said:

'The doctor tells me I've got to get up, but there's nothing to get up for. I don't know why they can't leave me here to die in peace.'

Petulantlŷ she plucked at the blanket, tearing off little tufts of wool and throwing them contemptuously on the floor. Perhaps she did this instead of cracking her fingers.

'It's all turned out for the best, hasn't it?' She spoke

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without conviction. 'I don't know what I'd have done if Thel hadn't been here to look after me — not that she's very good at it. She seems better, though, doesn't she?'

I said she was very pale.

'She always was pasty, that goes with red hair,' Mrs. Dean said. 'I don't know where she got that colour from. There's never been hair like that in our family, not to my recollection. She's put on weight, hasn't she? That's a good sign. Shows she's not fretting.'

Not necessarily. Sometimes one puts on weight through sheer misery — just eating for comfort.

'One of your new ideas,' she said dismissively. 'Anyway, Thel's had her chance. Kenji asked her again before he left. Most formal he was, asked her in front of me. You never knew that, did you?'

No, I didn't.

'Yes, in front of me. No hanky-panky that time. All above board, and Thel said no, very dignified. I was very proud of her, I can tell you.'

The whole house was full of Kenji, much more so than when he was in it. He had become an obsession for both women, and there was little else they talked about, and perhaps little else they thought about.

When I rejoined Thelma I noticed again how in such a short time she had altered. Her hair no longer hung near her shoulders; pinned into a sausage-roll it made her look years older. The lines of her mouth were hard and unyielding. She was set in her ways, and so careful of her possessions she could not bear them out of her sight; the small sitting-room was filled with oddments of glass and china and pieces of silver. She was continually moving

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them around, trying to find enough space for the silver boxes, the tiny engraved trifles to hold bonbons, the ornate entrée dishes, the mirrors with chipped china cupids grouped around the frames, the papier mâché trays, the porcelain bells, the jade-handled paper knives, all the useless bric-à-brac acquired in antique shops in Seaton.

She waved her hands helplessly towards them: 'Aren't they pretty? But there's never enough room, and I spend most of my life cleaning the things, and sometimes even now I feel I needn't have been this kind of woman. It was all a mistake. Perhaps I oughtn't to have been born — that was a mistake, too. Then I found Kenji, and then I let him go, and that was the biggest mistake, and not altogether my mistake, either. If mother hadn't set that dreadful man on us, that lunatic . . . If only she hadn't cared at all, if only she hadn't wanted to be kind, to keep me from having what I desperately needed. The cruelty of it — the cruelty of being kind, I mean. And the awful sense of responsibility we have for each other now. What's going to happen to me? When she dies I shan't be able to look after myself and I'll be a responsibility — only there won't be anyone to take it on.'

It was your choice, I said brutally. Kenji wanted to marry you, even your mother admits this, and I simply don't know why you refused him at the last minute.

'Yes, you do. He only asked me again because he felt he had to.' I like to pretend it was mother's fault, but it wasn't entirely. If I could have kept quiet and calm, nothing else would have mattered — mother and Mr. Willow wouldn't have mattered. I got hysterical and let

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myself go, and shouted and screamed and banged on the door, and that's what finished everything, wasn't it? After that Kenji began to wonder whether I'd "fit in". As soon as I lost my temper, it was all over. You know that's true, don't you?

Partly, I said. Anyway it didn't help.

'I'm admitting this now, and I'll never admit it again. For the rest of my life I'm going to be positive that if it hadn't been for my mother's interference I'd be in Tokyo, married and marvellously happy.'

If that's what you want, I said.

'It isn't at all what I want, but it's all I'm likely to get now. All I've ever really wanted is to get married. Almost anyone would have done. Anyone not too old or awful who wanted me and not the shop. Somehow I never really believed it would happen.'

It nearly happened.

'Being me I had to lose my temper, so it couldn't have happened.'

Early that evening we were in Mrs. Dean's bedroom, the three of us together, drinking tea before Mrs. Dean 'settled down' for the night.

'Nice being together again, just us,' Mrs. Dean said, sipping her tea noisily. 'This tea tastes more like tea than it ever did when Maryann was here before. Best tea I've had for years. Funny, isn't it?'

'That's because you've got your own way, mother. You generally do, and there's nothing funny about it.'

'Why don't you face up to life, Thel? No use living in the past. Kenji's gone and I can't help thinking good riddance.'

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'Think what you like, there's no need to say it.'

'I've had more experience than you' — Mrs. Dean spoke indulgently, as if Thelma was the invalid — 'and I know what that sort of thing leads to. Why, when I was no more than a girl a friend of mine married an Indian, and the child was black as the hearth.' She left him, of course.'

'Why?' Thelma asked dully.

'I told you why. What else could she do?'

Did she leave her husband? I asked. Or did she leave her husband *and* the child?

'Both, my dear, both. She hadn't the stamina.'

Although Mrs. Dean was speaking to me she stared at Thelma, who quite evidently hadn't the stamina either.

Tight-lipped and silent, Thelma poured out more tea.

'This really is remarkably good tea. Don't you think so, Thel?'

Thelma said she did not think so; it was the same tea they had been drinking for years.

'It must be the water, then. I've often noticed how chalky it is sometimes. Isn't it, Thel?'

'It's always chalky,' Thelma said. 'We live on chalk. The water's always chalky. Everything's chalky. There's *nothing* but chalk. Don't you even know that by now?'

'No need to get worked up,' Mrs. Dean said. 'I've noticed you're very nervy lately. I'm really worried about you. There's *nothing* wrong, is there, Thel?'

'Of course there's nothing wrong! I'm as happy as a sandboy. I don't exactly know what sandboys are, but they're always happy, aren't they, mother?'

Mrs. Dean looked startled. 'What's all this nonsense about sandboys when I only asked if you're all right?'

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'Apart from a continuous headache and feeling I've been beaten all over, I'm absolutely fine.'

Mrs. Dean sighed. 'You're so difficult to talk to, Thel, you always were as a child.' Suddenly turning to me, she asked: 'Don't you find her difficult to talk to?'

I said, firmly, that I didn't.

'I *am* your mother, Thel, and if there's anything wrong I ought to be told.'

'Would you mind explaining clearly what you mean?'

'I told you the story about the child to see if you'd say anything . . .'

'What was I *supposed* to say?' Thelma shouted.

'That's a nice way to talk to your mother.' Mrs. Dean was behaving haughtily. 'What are you supposed to say! You're *not* supposed to say anything, except it *would be* nice if you could be civil, for a change. I'm only concerned for your welfare. There's no harm in that, is *there?*'

'Oh, get on with it, mother, for heaven's sake! Get on with it, then we can have some peace.'

'And so I shall get on with it if I have a chance. You don't sound the same, Thel, and you don't look the same, somehow. It's *not* natural putting on all that weight around your stomach.' Mrs. Dean stared *hard at me*. 'We both said so, didn't we?'

I didn't say anything of the kind, I protested. You said that Thelma looked better because she was fatter, and I said it didn't mean she felt better.

'And you're quite right,' Thelma said. 'It *doesn't*. It just means I don't care what I look like.'

'And I still say it's not natural.' Mrs. Dean was tenacious. 'There *must* be a reason, and you'd better find out

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one way or another before it's too late, if it isn't too late already.'

Suddenly Thelma laughed. The sound was not pleasant.

'If you're trying to ask me if I'm going to have a child, the answer is no, I'm not. And that's no virtue on my part, either. Kenji wanted me — and no one else ever will. But we hadn't anywhere to go, and he wouldn't have liked it that way — besides I was too frightened.'

'It's shocking to talk like that, Thel. You're only doing it to hurt me. I don't know what I've done to deserve this.' *

'If you don't know, then you ought to. I can't blame myself for everything. I've never had much self-confidence, and when I had to make a decision I didn't know what to do — and so I did nothing, and so I *am* nothing, and I'm here, and that's what you wanted.' I can't even pretend to forgive you.'

'You're out of your mind.' Although Mrs. Dean spoke calmly she began to pluck at the blanket again. 'If you weren't I wouldn't stand for being treated like this. It's all that Kenji's doing, putting you against me like he did. I always thought he was artful, making an impression on you and then skedaddling off like that. I always thought he wasn't to be trusted. If you ask me——'

'No one asked you,' Thelma interrupted sharply. 'You just keep on talking and no one asks you anything.'

I sat silent, watching and listening. I did not even feel uncomfortable. I had an idea that my presence added

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relish to the scene. To some extent they were both enjoying their anger. There was nothing else left for them to enjoy.

'I always thought he was one for saving his skin,' Mrs. Dean said smugly.

Aren't we all? I asked.

'We haven't run away, have we? Though we're likely to be blown to smithereens any minute' — Mrs. Dean helped herself to a gingernut biscuit and munched at it contentedly — 'before you can say knife. And there won't be any what-do-you-call-ums this time.'

'What on earth are you talking about? What do you mean by "what-do-you-call-ums"? ' Thelma snapped,

Ultimatums, I said. But that's what we are waiting for — the answer to an ultimatum. And whatever happens we're in our own country. Kenji wasn't.

'That's a fine excuse. He's young and supposed to be in love and he gets a cable and you can't see him for dust.'

'Don't you dare suggest he was running away from me!' Thelma shouted. 'Don't you dare! He kept on asking me to marry him.'

'Oh yes, we know all about that. But he wouldn't commit himself and marry you before he left, would he? You couldn't arrive decently as his wife, could you? You had to go on later, didn't you?'

'You know perfectly well why.' He had to get his parents' permission. He couldn't just turn up with an English wife.'

'So he said. Supposing he changed his mind when he got you out there? Supposing he didn't mean to marry you at all? You'd have been in a nice pickle.'

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'Japan of all places! You're not cut out for that kind of caper.'

'Japan is very beautiful. You don't know what you're talking about.'

'So it may be very beautiful — for the Japanese. Sitting on the floor and eating without proper knives and forks, just bits of bone! Mr. Willow says——'

'Blast Mr. Willow!'

'Now, Thel, you just remember this is my house, and Mr. Willow's my friend, and your father's friend, and I'll speak my mind if it kills me.'

'It won't kill *you*——'

'Mr. Willow says,' Mrs. Dean continued implacably, 'Japan's no country for women. They're treated no better than dirt.'

Thelma began to shout incoherently and to wave her hands about.

I picked up the tea tray, muttered a few words about washing up, and left them.

I washed the cups and saucers under the tap so that I could hear nothing except the sound of running water.

After that I lit a cigarette and walked out into the tiny walled garden, sweet-smelling and peaceful. A shrub I did not know the name of was covered with buds, a few had opened into pale pink flowers. The tobacco plants and night-scented stocks honied the mild still air. The strip of grass was a soft rich green in the light-skied evening; a scattering of many-pointed leaves showed where the anemones would bloom next year. When I had last seen that garden the young late-flowering tulip tree nestling against a south wall was covered with large

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blossoms, heliotrope shading to cream, each separate petal slightly folded back. Even then they were on the point of falling; weeks ago they must have been swept away, and now there was no trace of them left.

Afterwards I went into the sitting-room and tried to read. I kept putting the book down and staring out of the window. The minutes were slow and heavy. • •

The school holidays were not yet over and the village was still enlivened by visitors. This was the hour of return for those who stayed in bed-and-breakfast boarding houses. Some of the visitors had spent the day in Seaton and had come back in the bus, others with rucksacks or picnic baskets trudged from the downs, others came from the café on the sea front which always closed early in the evening. Couples walked arm in arm, sunburnt, wind-swept, tired, and apparently at ease, and I wondered whether they had all forgotten what we were waiting for, and then I realised that to any casual passer-by it would seem that I too had forgotten, as I sat there at the window with a cigarette between my fingers, a book open on my lap, and with Thelma's small treasures of silver and mirrors and trinkets grouped protectively around me.

Children wearing khaki-coloured shorts and heavy sweaters, carrying boats and shrimping nets and books, skipped about in the road. No one called them back to the pavements because there was little traffic then. One or two of the children had wooden hoops, bowling them along with painted wooden sticks. The few village children — most of them were already indoors — had iron hoops, clanging and indestructible. I watched one child jogging up and down on a pogo stick — long out of

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fashion — her face fiery both from the sun and the effort she was making, while she counted *breathlessly*, 'twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two,' until she had hopped out of sight.

I wondered whether I would like to be as young as that again, and I decided no, I wouldn't. Most definitely, I wouldn't.

Suddenly I began to remember Emanuel, and to see him not as I had seen him, but to some extent as he was, and I felt a great rush of anger against myself, and then I needed to hurt myself, so I bit the inside of my lip until I could taste blood. Tired, and a little frantic for no reason at all, I tried to remember what Emanuel and I had talked about, and I decided that we had not talked, and then I tried to remember whether I had told him about Finn and Mr. Vale and Mr. Vale's mother, because at that very moment it seemed important, although I could not work out why.

Oh, if only I could remember absolutely everything, and then I could trace back, step by step, word by word, look by look, and see where the life was lost, where the pattern was botched.

I heard Thelma's footsteps dragging down the stairs; she sounded not unlike her mother.

She called softly to me, and I followed her into the kitchen where she produced a porcelain container, into which she poured some colourless liquid from a liqueur bottle. She placed the container in a saucepan of water, and we stood and watched it until the water boiled. On a black lacquer tray Thelma put two tiny porcelain cups, the size of coffee cups but without handles. Then she

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lifted the container out of the water and put that, too, on the tray which she carried almost reverently into the sitting-room. We sipped the liquid from the *tiny cups*; it was hot and bitter-sweet, a little like neat gin.

'I'm beginning to forget everything,' she said. 'I'm not even sure if this is made from rice or potatoes.'

Rice, I expect.

'Do you like it?'

Not very much.

'Neither did I at first, but now I do, and by the time it's gone I shall think it's the most heavenly drink in the world — and I shall never taste it again.'

Can't you buy it in England?

She shook her head. 'And if you can, I shan't. It wouldn't be the same.'

I don't think people ought to give one presents, I said. They are so very distressing.

'Or if they do they should always give themselves as well. People who give presents oughtn't to go away, ever.'

We each had a second cup of saké. It tasted better.

'Let's finish it,' Thelma said. 'I hate pouring things back.'

The third cup tasted better still. Then Thelma fetched the bottle.

'There's hardly any left,' she said, 'and who says it has to be hot? There's no one here to give any instructions.'

The word 'instructions' was difficult for her, so I tried to say it myself, but my tongue was too large for my mouth.

So we finished the bottle — there wasn't much.

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What does it matter? I asked. What does it matter about Emanuel and Finn and Mr. Vale and Mr. Vale's mother? Who cares?

'If I knew who they are, I might care,' Thelma said kindly.

They aren't any longer, I said grandly. They don't exist. Laurie doesn't exist either, neither does Alfred nor Ellen, and Gussie never did, really. Only Nicholas exists and I care about him, although he's the one who doesn't exist really because he's dead.

'Oh please don't cry,' Thelma said, 'otherwise I'll start; and if we both do, where will it end?'

So I managed not to cry.

'You'll be all right, I said. If you can stop me crying when I'm all set, you'll be all right.

When I got up to go the whole room moved with me. Muzzily we said goodnight. Thelma stooped to kiss my cheek.

'In some ghastly way mother knew what she was about,' Thelma said. 'I've been brought up to be frightened, and I'll go on being frightened. I wouldn't really have dared to leave here. I just couldn't. I'm stuck for ever and ever. It's quite cosy, really, knowing I needn't bother.'

As soon as I had left I heard the door bolted behind me.

For once I was up early, and I joined the people who strolled aimlessly about, serious-faced and wretched in the sunny weather. We congregated in small groups, some of us leaned against the cobbled sea wall, occasionally exchanging anxious half-smiles.

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The morning was already hazy with late summer heat; the beaches massed with rotting seaweed; in the heavy windless air the smell of decay pervaded the path by the coastguard cottages and eventually wafted into the village.

I walked away from the sea, past the small shops I knew so well, beneath the elms, along by the narrow path edging the pond, and slowly climbed the pitted chalky track, known locally as 'the white road', leading to the riding stables, petering out in a cluster of gorse and brambles where children scratched their arms and legs, scrambling into the midst of the thicket to reach the blackberry bushes bearing the largest, finest fruit for miles around.

I saw myself as I was twelve or thirteen years ago; a rather stocky child wearing a short-sleeved cotton frock, white socks and canvas tennis shoes. My straight fair-to-mouse hair, ear-tips length, brushed back from my forehead and fastened by a tortoiseshell slide in the daytime; by a wide white ribbon tied in a bow on the crown of my head for the evening.

The blackberries were ripening already, but I had no wish to pick them: I had gone blackberrying often enough, and besides they would stain my mouth as the wild strawberries had stained it — although now there was no Hans to scold me. I had forgotten Hans in my list of people whom I tried to pretend no longer existed.

The sounds and smells of summer lulled me near to sleep, and I thought how peaceful the morning was, and then shied away from the word, because if one admitted

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the word peace in one's world, war marched in and took its place on the opposing side.

I must have sat for an hour or more, pulling the tender grasses and nibbling at them; some of the stems tasted honey-sweet, some had no taste at all. I picked a clover flower and pulled out one or two of the petals, but the bees had sucked at them already, and there was nothing left for me to do except, reluctantly, to return to the village where there were people who knew what was going to happen.

I made my way slowly, choosing the wider bridle path, across the lane, and down to the pond by a different longer route.

The village green was deserted except for an old woman who sat on the seat where Thelma and I had so often sat, facing the pond. On her lap was a square cardboard box. As I approached she tapped on the box and called out angrily:

'Where's your gas mask? You've no right to be without it. We've all got to do as we're told now.'

At first I would not allow myself to understand, then in a panic I asked her what the time was.

'Never you mind,' she said. 'Time you went home and got your gas mask.'

The years of being young were suddenly over.

THE END